

J'aime Paris

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They went on a European vacation because his wife of forty-three years had insisted, that's what couples their age do. Besides, she said, she wanted to see Paris before she died. He asked her if she were planning on dying any time soon. She told him he wasn't funny.

On the morning of third day they took a group walking tour. After an hour he'd had enough of vaulted ceilings, murky stained glass, stone buttresses and Midwesterners with Iowa Hawkeye T-shirts and fanny packs asking where the bathrooms were. He removed his headset with the guided narration and put on his Bluetooth earphones. He opened his Charley Parker download. The first song was *April in Paris*. It's May, he thought but close enough.

He tapped his wife between her shoulder blades. "I have a headache. I think I'll go back to the hotel.

"What?"

He pointed to his forehead. "I...have...a...headache. Going back to hotel."

She removed her headset. "You want me to go with you?"

"No, no. You go ahead. I'll see you at dinner." He handed the tour headset to her.

"Wait." She put a bottle of Tylenol 3 in his hand, replaced her headset and walked double time to rejoin the group.

He figured he could get in maybe an hour of writing before he took a nap, but after walking around for fifteen minutes he realized he had no idea where he was. He thought about asking someone how to get to the hotel. His wife said most of the French spoke English, but he was too embarrassed to tell anyone he was lost. He tried to walk purposefully, as if he knew where he was going.

He bought a bottle of water and a cinnamon scone at a bodega by pointing to them. He paid with a five Euro note from the thick pack of money in his pocket. At least he wouldn't starve.

The day was heating up. Sleek women in black sleeveless tops and bare legs walked past him. He wondered why all of them seemed so slim. Was it because they all smoked?

He shrugged off his jacket and pulled his wool sweater over his head. His wife had insisted he wear it. Well, she hadn't insisted. She said if he wanted to be chilly, that was up to him.

The sweater made his palms damp. He couldn't see carrying it around. Not knowing what else to do with it, he dumped it in a trash bin. Bluesy music came from around the corner, behind the bodega. *Stormy Weather*.

A young woman with blonde dreadlocks was playing a tenor saxophone. An open case lay in front of her. Three people were watching. Her hair bounced as she played.

Behind her was a tall red door in a stone archway, connected to a crumbling church that he guessed was medieval. Part of the roof was missing. Men with hard hats were climbing on the scaffolding above.

The woman wore a white tank top that said *Go Figure* and black jeans. A handful of coins rested on the black felt liner of the saxophone case. As soon as she finished the people that had been listening walked away.

The man placed a five-Euro note in the case. “Tres bon.”

She slung the saxophone under her arm. “You’re American.”

“How did you...how did you know?”

“Your accent.” She pushed her hair back. Star tattoos ran up the inside of her forearm.

“You’re American, too?”

“I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy.” She removed the mouthpiece from the sax. “So, enjoying Paris? So-called city of light?”

He looked around. “Yes...I mean, no, actually.” His throat clutched. His face felt prickly. “See, I was on this tour and I...well, I’m uh, I’m kind of lost.”

“Yeah, I can tell.” When he didn’t answer, she said, “You wanna hear another song? How about the Gulf Coast High School Varsity Marching Band Fight Song.” She reinserted the mouthpiece and hit five quick notes.

The man nodded. “Pretty good.”

“Damn right. I made varsity as a freshman.”

The man looked up at the scaffolding. “Umn, is this church famous?”

“Depends on who you ask. Some old lady in the neighborhood told me Edith Piaf used to come here.”

“Really?”

“That’s what she really told me.” She pocketed the money and closed the saxophone case.

“And the red door?”

“People say it’s a sign of welcome for travelers. I’ve also heard it’s painted red to symbolize the blood of the lamb. All I know is, it’s my front door.”

“Wait.” He pointed to the church. “You live in there?”

“For now.”

Suddenly he wanted to know everything about her. “Could you play another song? I’ll pay. Sorry, that sounded stupid.”

“Not necessarily. What would you like to hear?”

“How about *April in Paris*?”

She turned her chin over her right shoulder, as if she were speaking to the rest of the band. “Boys, we got ourselves a romantic.” She closed her eyes and began to play.

After the first few bars it was all he could do to keep from crying. When she finished he took out a twenty Euro note. The first few notes of *Purple Haze* rang out. She took a cellphone from her back pocket. “My public.” She began to speak rapidly in French.

The man watched her expressions change from surprise to amusement. Her laughter skipped through the air. She walked in little circles and gestured with her free hand. He glanced at his phone. Emails promising huge 24-hour-only savings with Macy’s and Target. An offer to earn money with your own car by driving with Lyft.

The breeze picked up. He wondered if his sweater was still in the trashcan. It was time to go, he knew, but she was still on the phone. He waited until she turned back toward him. He waved.

“Une seconde.” She held the phone to her chest. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, I have to get back.”

“Yeah? Well, thanks for the dough.”

“You’re welcome.”

“De nada. That’s Spanish.”

“Listen.”

“Yeah?”

“Will you, uh, will you be here tomorrow?”

She winked. “Ya never know.” She returned to her call.

The man photographed the street sign with his phone. He hailed a cab and told the driver the name of his hotel. Five minutes later, as they pulled in front he recognized some of the people from the tour. They were out front on the stairs, chatting in small groups. A few had wine in plastic cups. The tour leader was collecting the headsets.

He showed the driver the photo on his phone. He said, “S’il vous plez.”

She was closing up her saxophone case as he got of the taxi. “Wow, you’re back. Is it tomorrow already?”

“What? No, I was, I mean, I just wanted to hear you play some more. But it looks as if I’m too late.”

She lifted her case. “All work and no play. Get it, no play?”

“Oh. Sorry.” He looked down at his feet. “Uh, you really live here?”

“Uh, really I do. So.”

“Well, thanks again.” He extended his hand. “Fred Barton.”

She curtseyed. “Andromeda. As in, chained to a rock to be sacrificed to a monster but saved from death by Perseus. So anyway, Fred Barton. I’m going in now.” He stood there as she opened the door. “You’re not coming back tomorrow, are you.”

They were supposed to take a bus ride to Normandy and on to Omaha Beach. “I don’t know.”

“Hey, wait a minute.” She scratched her head. “Do you know my parents or something? Did they send you?”

“What? No.”

“Tell me the truth. Because it would be just like them to send someone to try to track me down. Are you some kind of investigator or something?”

He wished he were. “No, honest. I mean, look at me. Like I said. I was lost.” He glanced at his watch. Dinner was in less than an hour. The theme was *J’Aime Paris*.

“Are you supposed to be somewhere right now, Fred Barton?”

He wondered where he was supposed to be. A jackhammer began to pound. “I like it right here.”

“Wow. You don’t mess around.” She stood by the red door. “So anyway. You wanna come in?”

The room was long and narrow. Light slanted in from a window with vertical metal bars. A glass vase with a cluster of white chrysanthemums sat on a square wood table under the window. The man pointed to a poster of Jimi Hendrix kneeling behind a flaming guitar. “Monterrey Pop Festival, 1967.”

“You were there?”

He was tempted to say he was. “I saw the movie.”

She kicked her sandals off. “You sure my parents didn’t send you here?”

“I’m not sure what sent me here.”

“Ha. Well, make yourself at home. There’s wine and crackers. My back’s killing me.” She lit a candle. The sandalwood fragrance drifted around her. She got down on her hands and knees, lowered her chest to the cement floor and stretched her arms out. Her buttocks raised above her hips.

“What are you doing?”

“Puppy pose.”

“What?”

“For my back. Yoga. Ever do it?”

“No, I ...no.”

“You should. Definitely you should, Fred Barton.” Her shirt slid part way up her back. Her triceps flexed. Her hair spilled over in front. Without looking up, she said, “Coming?”

He sank down next to her on his hands and knees. His back crackled. He stretched his arms out in front of him, supplicant. “Is this right?”

“There is no right or wrong.”

He listened to her breath. He tried to breathe in rhythm with her. He closed his eyes. The stone floor cooled his forehead. His jaw relaxed. Saxophone music trilled in his head. He felt her hand on the small of his back. He shivered.

“You cold, Fred Barton?”

“No. I feel, I don’t know. Different.”

“Free?”

She pulled the bottom of his shirt from the back of his pants. Her fingers massaged his spine. He sat up. “What are you doing now?”

“Sexy yoga, Fred. You know what?”

“What?”

“A smile would take ten years off your face.”

He smiled. It felt like the first time in a long time. “How’s this?”

“Tons better.” She turned over on her back. She pulled his shirttails loose and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. “Ever kissed a saxophone player?”

“Not recently.”

“Goddamn. You’re secretly funny, Fred Barton.” She wound her legs around his waist and pressed her inner thighs against him. “Umn.”

He felt himself growing hard. “Is this more sexy yoga?”

“Nope. It’s called foreplay.”

Andromeda slipped on a jeans jacket with an embroidered *Mona Lisa* on the back. She poked him on his side with the tip of her saxophone case.

His eyes flew open. He groped around for his pants. “You’re leaving?”

The flickering light from the sandalwood candle made a halo around her hair.

“Places to go, people to see, music to play.”

“When are you coming back?”

“Eventually.” She bent at the waist and kissed his forehead. “Stay as long as you like. Or don’t like. And don’t forget to feed the mice.”

He laughed. “What do they eat?”

“The same thing as the rats.”

“Got it.”

“Oh, I almost forgot, call for Fred Barton, call for Fred Barton. Here you go.” She handed his cell phone to him. “TTFN.”

“What?”

“Ta ta for now.” She slipped out the door and melted into the twilight.

He checked his phone. His wife had called three times and texted twice. He slipped the phone in his pocket.

It was 7:15. They would have had dinner by now back at the hotel and broken into discussion groups. One or two of them may have wondered where he was. The tour director, a skittish graduate student at the Paris School of Art and Architecture would be pulling her hair out. His wife would be pressing her to call the police.

His stomach pinged. He stopped at the bodega where he’d bought the scone and water and purchased two Lebanese flat bread rollups. He finished his by the time he got back to the church.

It had been remarkably easy, he thought, to forget about his marriage, his retirement plan, his grandson, his dog, his business, his house, his car, his car, his golf clubs, his taxes, his few friends, his investments, and so on. The song, *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover* played in his head. How dopey. How appropriate.

He found a pen and some paper and wrote a note to Andromeda: “Thanks for everything. Fred Barton.” He put the rollup next to the note. He inserted his headphones.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. From the taxi ride he knew the way back to his hotel. At least he thought he did. The air was cooler now, but not too cool, definitely not sweater weather. He decided to walk. The light was golden. There were so many things to see.