

Robert Overmann

## L'ESPRIT DE L'ESCALIER

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There's nothing more disorienting and simultaneously freeing than not understanding a word of what is said around you. It's a bit like trying to communicate with a bunch of televisions broadcasting "white noise." But one quickly learns to tune it out; one learns to let go of the need for understanding and is able to turn one's focus inward toward one's own thoughts. In this way, a place of constant stress and distraction becomes one of peaceable introspection.

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"Parlez-vous anglais?" was the only French I knew when I booked my plane ticket to Paris. I did not expect to travel further after arriving in Scotland, but chances were slim that the great cities of Europe would ever again be within a two-hour flight. Incredulous that I was purchasing a plane ticket to Paris, I plopped my £55 on the desk of Mike, our German travel agent who spoke little more English than I did French. Ticket in hand, I invited two of my roommates to join me. We booked the cheapest hotel room we could find for three nights and counted down the days until the following Friday when we were to catch a flight out of Edinburgh.

From when I stepped onto the tarmac of the *Aéroport Paris—Charles de Gaulle* until my departure the following Sunday evening, I ate one proper, full-course meal. I'm a food tourist—anytime I travel, I want to try the local cuisine. Unfortunately, food in Paris is exorbitantly expensive—in some areas of Paris, a single bowl of French onion soup can cost in the ballpark of €14, or about \$18, so I ate mainly at grocery stores and street vendors. My diet consisted of everything from Nutella crepes to smoked salmon wraps, gazpacho, and even a carton of soured milk—a delicacy whose appeal still mystifies me. Purchasing food was always an adventure, since I couldn't read any labels. My Saturday evening meal, though, was by far the best, and worst, of my time in Paris.

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By 4:30 Saturday afternoon, I was the hungriest I'd been thus far during my trip. I'd ridden the first RER train into the city at 8:00 a.m.—a substation lay just a few blocks from my room at *L'Hôtel Hipotel*



Zuleta | Sara Murillo

*Paris Hippodrome* in the suburb of *Joinville-le-Pont*. My feet were blistered and weary; earlier that day I'd been to *L'Opéra National de Paris*, *La Basilique du Sacré Coeur de Montmartre*, *L'Hôtel National des Invalides*, and *le tombeau de Napoléon*. According to a local who spoke English, the cheapest food in town could be found in the Latin Quarter, a region of Paris known for its cuisine, its small alleyways, and its nightlife. I rode the Paris Metro one stop past *Notre Dame de Paris* into the grungy station of *Place St. Michel*.

Stepping off the metro train into throngs of people, I struggled to find space on the platform for myself and the only luggage I'd brought, my backpack. Surrounding me stood wealthy businessmen, clean-shaven and wearing pinstriped suits; students spoke excitedly to one another, wearing berets or floral dresses; young children clung tightly to their mothers; black men, likely from French Algeria, bobbed their heads to music from the young man beat-boxing, a change-cup in front of him, relying on the generosity of others. Subway stations truly were a microcosm of the greater city.

I made my way through the crowd and the station's concrete corridors. Searching for an exit, I was flanked by unsettling advertisements depicting a scowling, sadistic biped cat gripping the French soda "Orangina." A *sortie* sign directed me up a set of steep beige steps to ground level. People chatted amiably, producing a collective din, though it wasn't agonizingly loud. As I climbed further, I began to hear the deep echoes of a drumbeat, and the muffled tones of street music. Sunlight graced me as I emerged onto the sidewalk, immediately next to the banks of the Seine River. A large baroque-style stone fountain depicting Saint Michel slaying a demon of some sort dominated the plaza in front of me. A *jongleur* performed, and I dodged bicyclists hurriedly weaving between crazed motorists as I crossed the street to stand closer to the Saint Michel fountain. Traffic laws are more like suggestions in other nations, and it isn't uncommon to see motorcyclists on sidewalks, or cars blatantly disobeying traffic signals and lane markings.

As I walked into the heart of the plaza, I saw a line of *gendarmes* in the distance clad in full riot gear. The pulse of the drum beat increased in volume as I approached, and rainbow flags waved above heads in the crowd. Curiosity piqued, I pushed my way through the

crowds to get a better view. Soon, I was standing directly in front of a tight-lipped *gendarme*, his clear fiberglass shield planted squarely in front of him. He was youthful, clean shaven, and looked straight ahead, black club in his free hand.

I turned to a woman next to me who was wearing a pair of high-waisted red shorts and a blue and white tank-top, the colors of the French flag. She held an open bottle of malt liquor in one hand, her other hand in the air to cheer on the parade.

"Parlez-vous anglais?" I inquired.

"Oui, un peu," she responded—a stroke of luck.

"Do you know what's going on here?"

"Gay marriage was just legalized in France; they're celebrating!" she responded. I was fully aware of how non-Parisian I must have looked.

I made my way through the narrow alleyways of the Latin Quarter, walking past bars and restaurants that served food from nearly every ethnicity one could imagine. Children leaned out from jutting balconies above me, and young black men attempted to peddle small Eiffel Tower souvenirs. I finally found an area where the parade was not lined by the *gendarmes*, and I made my way to the front. Men in tight thongs held hands and swigged beer as they marched; some men were dressed as women, rather convincingly. Women marched in tandem with their partners, some topless, others holding banners and gay rights flags. Trucks with trailers crawled down the street at a walking pace, blaring both French and American music. Parisians young and old had taken to the streets to celebrate their rights with an incredible fervor and absurdity.

I heard a barely-audible meow next to me as I stood drinking in the sights and taking photos. I looked to my left toward the sound's origin. There a frail-looking, blonde-haired woman lay on the ground, napping on an uncomfortable-looking sewer grate in the sidewalk. A Siamese cat sat patiently beside her, as if to guard the discarded McDonalds cup she was using to solicit loose change. She was probably about 50, though she looked older; her skin was significantly weather-beaten, her hair frail and disheveled. Though the streets were packed, the parade's participants were giving her and her feline companion a wide berth. I have no idea how she had been sleeping, but she began to stir, and her cat nuzzled the side of her head. She muttered some-

thing indecipherable in French, still lying on the ground. A small pool of bloody saliva lay on the sidewalk next to her.

“Déplacez! Excusez-moi!” a man yelled from my left. I swiveled my head to see a *gendarme* in riot gear pushing his way through the crowd. I stepped backwards, immediately next to the homeless woman, though I wasn’t in his path, given his current trajectory. The man walked in front of me, then looked toward the homeless woman, then downward. He planted his high-laced black boot directly on top of her change cup, squashing it. Tink tink tink; the woman’s loose change fell down the sewer grate. Without looking back, the man continued to push through the jubilant masses.

An ethereal hand clutched my throat with an empathetic sadness. I looked down at the woman; she didn’t get up, didn’t speak, didn’t move in the slightest except to pet her cat, running her hand from its brown head-markings down its long, too-slender back. The cat purred and sat with grace I’d never before seen from a cat in a crowd. I reached my hand into my back pocket, then remembered that I had transferred my wallet to my front left pocket: Paris has a significant pick-pocketing problem, and I was alone. My travel companions and I had had a disagreement over which attractions to visit, and elected to enjoy the trip separately; thus, I had to take extra care as a lone American student in a foreign country.

I extracted a €5 note from my wallet, as I’d judged she lost about €3 from the cup that had been so maliciously crushed.

*Just €5? You can do better.*

*I need it, though. That’s more than she had before.*

“Merci,” she whispered, almost inaudibly, taking the note from my hand.

I nodded, and asked if I could pet her cat.

She shrugged her shoulders from her sitting position. I’d forgotten once again that English is not the spoken language here. I pointed at her cat and made a petting motion; when all else fails, mime.

She held it up to me, the cat still purring. I ran my hands through its soft, albeit slightly mangy fur and scratched its throat. It closed its eyes and nuzzled the back of my hand. *Au revoir.*

It was about 6:00 p.m., and my stomach growled harder than ever. I counted €33 left in my wallet, and turned my attention to the

multitude of eateries lining the Latin Quarter. There were gyros, Spanish food, Mexican food, Thai food, Indian food, and more available. I was in Paris, though, and wanted to eat a traditional French dinner. After diligent menu-comparing at multiple *brasseries*, I settled upon *La cuillère et les couteaux*, or “The spoon and the knives.” Just about all restaurants in Paris have tables on the sidewalks, which was important to me, as I wanted to eat outside. This particular *brasserie* had a “Choisissez 3 pour €15,” menu, and other patrons seemed to be enjoying their meals. Red and white checked tablecloths also charmed me.

I fortuitously chose the restaurant whose server spoke decent English; I asked him what was his favorite dish, and he pointed me toward the cheese fondue. Not one to distrust a Frenchman’s taste in food, I ordered Spanish mussels, a loaf of bread with Dijon mustard, followed by the acclaimed fondue, then crème brûlée for dessert. Because dinner is a social event in France, wine isn’t available by the single glass at many *brasseries*; I opted for the 50 cL pitcher instead of the entire bottle. Remembering to ask for flat water so as to avoid being served carbonated water, I sat back and reflected on my day. I listened to the spoken French around me, and I couldn’t help but appreciate the old French architecture.

My appetizer was delicious—the mussels were fresh and cooked perfectly; the bread was slightly sweet and well-toasted, though, word to the wise, Parisian Dijon mustard is meant to be used sparingly, no matter how much you, like myself, might like mustard. I drank the cool blush wine, and, about half an hour later, my main course arrived. The server steered me well, I thought. The cheese fondue was rich and strong. I couldn’t have been enjoying myself more. That was, until I heard a familiar meow.

I looked to my right, though I knew immediately what cat had uttered that meow. Weakly ambling down the street was the woman I’d encountered on the sidelines of the gay rights parade, Siamese companion following loyally. She walked laboriously, but deliberately, with a small Ziploc bag of cat food in her left hand. Though clearly hungry, she didn’t eye my food. She glanced briefly at me and nodded as she passed by my table.

I looked downward, examining myself and my food. I was eating a three-course meal that cost no less than €23, which amounts to

about \$31 in American currency. My clothes were reasonably nice and my backpack contained some terribly expensive sunglasses. I had a wonderful family who had graciously suggested I spend part of my summer abroad on their dime. I would be returning home to my family, my girlfriend, my pets. That familiar phantom hand returned to my throat, its strong, slender fingers squeezing ever-tighter.

I sipped my wine, loosening the spectral grasp on my gullet. *You paid for this, Bob. You'll never enjoy this again.* My hand returned to my spoon, and I picked further at my crème brûlée.

*She's never tasted anything like this.*

*You don't know that.*

But I did know it. At least, it had been many years since she'd eaten such a delicacy, I thought.

It's incredible how much one's mindset influences their other senses. My previously heavenly crème brûlée tasted dirty and too rich. I finished the last of it, and poured the remaining wine into my glass.

Sipping more to drown the clamors of injustice in my head than for the taste, I waited for the check. I looked at the table-cloth, trying to count checkers in a square foot; I searched the crowd for interesting-looking passerby; I looked up at the sky, puffy clouds so high above.

*She can enjoy the clouds just as I do.*

*Is that the best you can do?*

My server brought me the check. "Passez une bonne soirée, monsieur," he intoned. I paid hastily, happy to have my meal behind me. My heart beat anxiously. My head was fuzzy with cognitive dissonance and too many glasses of *vin*. So I did the only thing I could think to do at the time: I jumped up, kicked my chair out of my way, and I ran.

I ran hard in the direction she had walked a half hour before, dodging through the mostly-dispersed crowds of the afternoon's parade. My backpack swung back and forth against my back and sweat beads rolled down my face. I didn't know the Latin Quarter, and I had no idea where I was headed. I scanned the crowd as best I could at my clip. *Maybe she's taking another nap on the ground.*

I dodged rightward next to *Église Saint-Séverin*, and looked across the steps of the church. Sometimes poor people gathered there, banking on strangers' generosity. Not seeing her, I continued to run. On a

whim, I veered left down an alleyway, struggling to make out shapes in the growing darkness. My feet carried me down the boulevard next to the Latin Quarter; I ran in the gutter of the road so as to avoid flattening somebody on the crowded sidewalks.

*Fuck. You'll never find her. She's gone.*

I knew it—I knew I had no hope of finding her. I stopped, panting hard. I had been running for approximately ten minutes, I thought, though I could barely remember the streets I'd ran down. Reaching toward the metal banister that separated the sidewalk from the banks of the Seine, I bowed my head, allowing the welling tears to mix with the sweat cascading down my face. I felt no shame in my spectacle, no embarrassment for acting uncouthly, only a sickening sadness.

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The French phrase *l'esprit de l'escalier* has no English equivalent. It translates roughly to "staircase wit," and is most often used in the context of past conversations: one wishes they had whipped out the perfect witticism or retort. It also can refer to the sense of poignant regret one feels when one realizes they should have made their choices differently.

I wish I had given the old woman more money. I wish I had offered her some of my dinner. I wish I had gotten up immediately and walked beside her and her Siamese. I wish I had bought her a blanket instead of lavishing myself with such a meal. I wish I had treated her with the generosity I look for in others.

*You gave me far more than I gave to you. Au revoir, belle âme.*