

The Paris American

by Curtis Pierce

He returned to America on the Fourth of July. Twisting in his cramped window seat miles above the Atlantic, he buckled up before the descent. "You can handle this," he muttered. Hungover, still reeling from the dreamy head-turning experience of having been an American in Paris. Narrow streets. Sidewalk cafes. Gothic castles by the Seine in the middle of a modern city that drew his gaze and magically transported him to the middle ages. Pretty women in winter with long dark hair wearing light blue woolen neck scarves over dark overcoats speaking a foreign language that sounded like a melodic sonata for flute. When he landed at JFK, it was twilight.

He left for France after graduating USC with a degree in business. Not his first choice, but the pressure on an only child to take over Galbraith Investment Management--an institution, a family symbol for generations-- was overwhelming.

"Why Paris?" asked his stern-faced father seated at the mahogany table in the study, "What about law school? The firm will belong to you one day. Maybe sooner than you think. No time to waste. You need to be practical. Time is money."

Once Adrian dared point out that father's platitudes could get a bit tiresome. "If an expression is hackneyed," the patriarch coldly replied, "it is only because it has withstood the test of time and become an established truth."

"A year in France will make me more valuable to the company," Adrian pointed out. "We'll be able to expand and offer investment advice to French speaking investors in Europe and beyond. The firm will have more of an international presence."

What a solid reason. What an intelligent explanation. Or as the French would say, "quelle connerie" which (if found in a dictionary) would translate into something entirely different.

Yet the pretext--however transparent--worked. Adrian had gotten away--for a little bit anyway--from venues he loathed like the social

club with the brass sign on the door "Members Only." When his attendance was de rigueur, he wore Levis and a black nylon T shirt, flouting the unspoken dress code--navy jackets over cashmere v-neck sweaters, preferably pastel.

I forgot how wide the streets are, he thought while marching up Broadway. The cars too. It felt strange to hear English spoken around him.

"When time does the subway close?" he asked the grey-haired man in the wooden kiosk by Times Square.

"They run twenty-four hours."

"Really? That's great."

At the edge of Manhattan, Adrian watched a rainbow of colors flare above the water of the smoke filled bay. Glowing in the hazy distance was the Statue of Liberty, which decorated the seascape like an ivory figurine. He overheard two voices speaking French. .

"Que-ce que c'est beau." Adrian looked over at the dark-haired couple in blue jeans. No more than twenty-four. He opened his mouth to say something but stopped.. Odd, feeling more of a kinship to these strangers than his true compatriots, grumbling about the fireworks being "BETAH LAST YEEAH."

"Oui, c'est beau," he whispered.

When he awoke the next morning in a small hotel room overlooking 5th Avenue, he sat up and blurted "where am I?"

At the Starbucks in the lobby, he ordered breakfast. "Coffee and a croissant, please."

"What's your name?" asked the smiling barista?

He recalled the boulangerie in Paris where the tall brown-eyed vendeuse with auburn hair tied in the back with a white ribbon would hand him a baguette in exchange for euros. A soft doorbell-sounding voice: "Merci. Au revoir monsieur."

The Sorbonne was an impressive monument but like everything in Paris, compact. Nothing like the sprawling campus of Columbia University. Wouldn't it be something to study art history at

Columbia? He recalled the incident at the Musee d'Orsay staring at a Renoir writing down all his impressions on a notepad.

"Vous pouvez revenir demain." said the guard. Then loudly in English with a harsh French accent. "We close now."

His father often bought expensive pieces of art but rarely commented on them.

He imagined the upcoming confrontation. "Truth be told, I'm really not interested in business or law. It's not who I am."

Then father would talk about his younger brother, Uncle Joseph, who gave up everything to be a novelist and drank himself to death.

No publications for posthumous discovery. Would father go there again?

"You look lost." The voice belonged to a serious looking tall blond woman with penetrating blue eyes that appeared to process every detail.

"Guess it depends on how you define lost. I'm visiting. You a student here?"

"Yes. American literature.." The green denim backpack hanging from her shoulder looked heavy. Probably contained books and a laptop.

"I envy you. I just got back from Paris where I was studying French at the Sorbonne."

"Really? My dissertation is on expatriate fiction of the 20th century. In Tropic of Cancer, Miller writes that Paris attracts the tortured. What do you think?"

"I think he's right."

"Interesting. You should check out our library. I'm heading there now. Walk with me. By the way, welcome back."

Adrian inhaled the muggy summer heat standing in front of the deck on the ferry to Liberty Island. For a fleeting moment, he thought of the inevitable confrontation awaiting. Then saw himself back in France, seated on an old plush red velvet chair at a literary cafe at St. Germaine on a rainy day, a long gray scarf around his neck, filling the blank graph paper pages of his French notebook with blue ink from his thick lacquer fountain pen.

It was early evening, a short-haired man in a pinstripe charcoal suit with a black leather briefcase sat next to him. He smiled politely, ordered a vin blanc and opened up the latest edition of *Le Monde*.

“C'est sympa ce cafe,” said Adrian.

“Ah, vous etes etranger,” replied the native Parisian amicably with no accent.

The ship continued to approach the symbolic monument in the distance. The details of the colossal figure gradually came into focus. Adrian gazed first at the sculpted face. His eyes moved slowly up the extended right arm, focusing briefly on the clutching hand and finally settling on the object within her grasp, the torch. He stood motionless for a long moment, eyes opened wide. He was no longer un américain à Paris. He was an American in America.

