

These Blank Years

This café on the *Quai de Montebello* is the same one I can see when I look down from the windows of our hotel. When I look up now, I can see Liz is keeping the bedroom window closed to hold out the noise, but she leaves a gap in the bathroom one so not to shut it out completely, and let some air into the rooms.

The café is filled with people still drinking from the night before. The man and the woman got another wine-looking bottle that pours like beer. The way they touch hands I can tell that they've known each other for some time, but I suspect the touching ends with their hands. There is something when they lean forward to talk, to whisper. Almost as nice is the way they lean away. I know the bars are closed now along the *Rue de la Huchette*. I stopped hearing the music at dawn.

The six kids next to me are trying to order drinks from a checkered-shirted man. The man seems too happy when he points at each of the kids and he shouts the same thing. "*Café. Café. Café.*" The kids are shouting other drinks but it doesn't lessen the smile on the checkered-shirted man's face. Not until the waiter waves him off and makes the kids order again.

The checkered-shirted man is looking up *Rue St-Jacques* over the *Petit Pont* and onto *Ile de la Cité*. He's leaning on one of the round tables and smoking a cigarette. It's his job to sweep the sidewalk every morning.

I woke early and went for a run. I remember the sun coming up behind Notre-Dame, and how Paris was lit in the purple hue that happens when the dawn is cloudy. I ran down the *Quai de Montebello* toward *Ile St-Louis*, crossed over on *Pont de Sully*. On the right bank side of *Ile St-Louis* the street lamps and the sunrise were against the old buildings and I realized that when I have dreamed of Paris it had been in this light and at the speed of my running pace. Halfway down I turned back toward the middle of the island. It will be easy to remember the sound and the feel of running down *Rue Ile St-Louis*, the street that splits the small Seine island like the halves of a shell.

The six kids next to me are loud. So are the kids at the other tables. There is no one in the café but me that has come for the morning.

I ordered another *café creme*. It's slow getting here. The waiter is a pale thin man with a serious look. He wears one of those leather vests that I like, black and rounded low below the neck with the little pockets that he'll use to make change.

The kids next to me are getting louder still. One keeps brushing my arm, not so much from the closeness of our space, but from the animated movements he must use to make his point. Every time he brushes me he looks over and smiles.

I had intended to re-start this journal four and a half years ago. I have still that green leather notebook. Twenty years from now will I remember these blank years, or will I think another journal had been lost?

A lot has happened, I guess. I moved from one southern town to the next, and just two weeks after we return from this trip I'll move to a third, continuing my odyssey, or my penance, to places I don't want to be, for a career I'd rather not have.

My sister died. I had thought to open the next journal with "My sister died today." I'm glad that I didn't. I also never finished "Wayward Angel", my poem of her dying the way she did. Nor "Christmas Goose", concerning the day they called to tell me.

The waiter didn't hear me the first time, or didn't remember, or ignored me, but I just ordered my *café creme* again. I chalk it up to the language difference. I don't agree with the French are rude thing. I don't see a difference.

The kid's arguing, closely, is getting more heated. One of the girls got up to leave but they talked her out of it. I like her the way I like some of the other women in Paris. Her hair is short, and it rounds the shape of her face. I like how her cheekbones accent her eyes. I will remember the way she had smiled at me, for she could tell I had been looking at her.

They sound like they're switching between French and Spanish, saying *puto* with emphasis. I believe it means *whore*, but I'm not sure because of the masculine ending. Two of the boys are pulling on both of the pretty girl's arms and there is resistance in her shoulders. She wants to leave again. It's not until the other girl rubs her back and whispers in her ear that she decides to stay.

The checkered-shirted man is back and happy. When he walks over to the kids he shouts *puto* along with them and takes some empty drinks off their table. This time the pretty girl looks up at me with eyes harder than I expect, and I look away slowly.

No change at all in the windows.

Yesterday I was up a straight thirty-two hours. I started the day at seven in the morning in Tennessee and went to bed at ten at night in Paris. I tried to sleep on the plane but it was impossible.

We took the *RER* from *Charles-de-Gaulle* directly to the *St-Michel* station. The short walk to the hotel seemed longer with the bags. I dropped them there. We couldn't check in until noon.

We walked over to a café on *Ile St-Louis* for breakfast. There were only a few people in the café and on the sidewalk outside the windows. It was a nice place, with a serving of *café au lait* out of a silver pitcher and Liz and I shared a large *omlette jambon e fromage*. In the first day funk I was thankful that Paris let me have her less crowded than she often does, so nice to look at the small

bridge that connects the *Ile de la Cite`* and the *Ile St-Louis*, the stone railings perfect to guard against the Seine that I couldn't see but I knew was there.

We still had an hour to kill and we thought we might walk through Notre-Dame. The line was already long so we crossed the Seine and wandered until we were at *Place Maubert* that I liked for all the food shops. It was market day. Blue canvas awnings propped up by metal poles covered the sidewalks and the stalls of food.

I bought a roasted partridge and a baguette and ate them in the street. The last things I studied were the rabbits with their heads on and the chickens with their heads and their feet on. The ones with blue feet are chickens from *Bresse*. I wish I had a place to cook a *Bresse* chicken.

That Christmas Day it was the first time I had ever cooked a goose. I ordered it special from the butcher three weeks earlier. I wanted a fresh goose, never frozen.

In the end I decided not to stuff it, just a heavy dusting of salt and pepper after I had rubbed it inside and out with butter. Inside the cavity, I placed five cloves of garlic, three shallots, some parsley, and two whole lemons that I had pricked several times with a fork.

I was happy when I heard my father's voice. I said Merry Christmas and he said Merry Christmas back to me. When he said it, it sounded like all the other years he had said it.

My sister was dead. The following ten minutes remain unknown to me. Uncatalogued. To this day, and to myself, I appeared to be faking.

The goose was large and barely fit into the oven. Still, I could fit in the long neck that would help the sauce. The goose needed to be basted every ten minutes and when it was done I de-glazed the roasting pan with white wine, boiled it a few minutes and strained out the solids.

While the goose was resting, I told my older children that my sister had died. At the table, most times, the only noise was from the baby. The older two

said several times how much they liked their toys this year. Everyone told me they liked the goose.

The kids next to me asked what I was writing. They were polite and seemed genuinely interested. Embarrassed to answer, I said “just some notes about the trip.”

“We were just interested,” the boy closest to me said. He apologized then for being so loud, but I told them that I couldn’t understand them, and so it didn’t bother me much.

“Good,” he said. “We are just talking shit.” The double “t” sound he used at the end of that word sounded like another syllable.

When we were young, we’d often sleep in the same bed with our heads next to one another’s and I remember my mother saying she could not tell us apart because my sister’s hair was the same as mine.

The last time I remember a genuine closeness between us was when we were walking down a Bayonne street in the afternoon. It must have been the summer before my 7th grade. Brothers and sisters divide at some point, but that day we made a pact not to tell on one another, for anything. In those days the most common tell was for cursing. She was the first to say a good one to prove that she trusted me. I wish I could remember exactly what she said.

She dyed her hair blonde later that year just after she entered high school. She would keep her hair blonde for the rest of her life.

The kids asked where I was from. I say Tennessee, but after I say it I think I am from any other place than Tennessee. It would have been better if I told them I was from New York and I thought of all the ways that I could fake it. It is a virtue, or it is a flaw, that I don’t lie to some kids I’ll never see again.

In truth, I am more displaced than most. I grew up in the northeast of the United States but I live in the south, and my values are displaced, and certainly

my soul. When your soul is displaced the place you live does not fit. Things bother you. The corporal punishment and prayers in the public schools. You can't buy booze on Sundays. The only place to shop is the fucking Wal-Mart. And that ridiculous and stupid sounding way they say *come back* when all the other store clerks in the world say *thank you*.

The six kids next to me just left. They all said goodbye.

The shorthaired girl looked at me, an apology on her face, then she smiled and wished me a good stay. She had a timeless face, I decided. I would like to see it change from twenty to thirty to forty to fifty to sixty. I liked the bold and calm way she held my eyes. I liked that her clothes were loose and her body would be a surprise. I liked that it made her happy that I liked to look at her.

"Bye bye," she said only once. "Bye bye," she said. *Bye bye*.

I remember my first Paris entry in the last journal, when I woke at three o'clock in the morning with the strange feelings from the strange dreams and listening to the cars on the *Boulevard St Germain*. It was raining and the wet streets reflected the red tail lights of the taxis, and big yellow leaves of an October autumn were dusted on the pavement. The trees that lined the boulevard made a new noise in the wind, their midway limbs bouncing at the height of our balcony. The dreams were about old souls and it had been my first night ever in Paris and the dreams made me feel like I had been here before.

In one dream, my wife, not Liz, stood out against the other women in Paris because her hair was blonde. Whatever it was that I had done the blame was clearly mine. I wanted her pathetically and my lust was mixed with a love I did not recognize.

Across the wet street was an old church. I had read in the guide books that it still held its masses in Latin. I thought of angels. Angels again. That I had seen one. That I will see one again.

The walls of our hotel would be completely lighted now by the sun coming into our room.

Still, there is no change in the windows and I know Liz is still sleeping. I best go and wake her. We need to get our next day in Paris going.

Our last trip, I didn't like my café at first. It didn't seem tucked away enough, right there on the corner of *Boulevard St Germain* and *Rue des Bernadins*. I began to wait there for Liz while she got ready. She couldn't expect me to wait in the cramped room, enduring the tight spaces while Paris was just outside. It was always a delight when I saw her through the café window as she bounced down the steps of the hotel. Her face was chubbier then, along with her body swollen beautifully with a few months of pregnancy.

I could tell by her smile -- all was forgiven.

End