

## My French Obsession

**Francophile:** Individual who has a strong positive predisposition towards the culture, history and the people of France.

Have you ever been in love with a place and never traveled there never walked the city streets, or been in love with a person and never physical laid eyes on them? Well I have, in this case it's a place and not a person. I fell in love with Paris at a young age and I cannot tell you why. I think maybe in my past life I was a Parisian. This obsession is so real I can tell you how it feels to sit and drink wine at a café while people watching, or know what the smell of fresh baked pastries can do your senses. What walking down a cobble street holding a baguette in your hand while Grace Jones sings La Vie En Rose can do to your mind. Shopping at an outdoor market all the while looking sophisticated and chic. Strolling with my love through the Luxembourg Gardens on a warm summer day marveling at the beauty all around us, the intoxicating smell of blooming flowers with colors so vivid, you can close your eyes and feel the color. Cruising the river seine at night with the lights of the city as a backdrop looking every bit a picture postcard.

I have never been to Paris, but that knowledge is so real to me, I feel it, smell it, and in a strange way live it. My parents were baffled by this obsession of mine, but they never tried to stop my dreaming. One Christmas my mother brought me a beret; and my older brother brought me the "HOW TO SPEAK FRENCH" cassettes (remember cassettes) the sounds that came out of my mouth scared the hell out of our cat Patches. I walked around the house playing those cassettes until the tape broke; my beret was so wore it crumbled in my hand.

Reality was New Jersey, but in my mind I was in the Latin Quarter Paris France. I made up my mind at the ripe old age of 12, that one day Paris was going to be my home. I started taking French seriously in junior high when everyone else was taking Spanish. I was speaking French pretty good by then; my friends would ask me what this French thing was all about, something's just don't need explanation this is one of them. I told them I will leave you in New Jersey speaking Spanish, while I am in Paris speaking French. My seventh grade French teacher was a god sent to me, Mr. Jacques Chevalier was French born who had a passion for teaching and making learning fun. He fit into my obsession like a glove. He made Paris come alive in ways I could never imagine. I would sometime stay after class and he would tell me stories about his childhood growing up in Paris, the music, the food, the culture which only made me want to leave New Jersey NOW.

He was my French teacher all through junior high; I cannot put into words how much I loved him. Every time he would go home to Paris he would bring me something back, a scarf, books, notepads and a huge wall poster of the Eiffel Tower that I hung on my bedroom wall, it is still there. My brother and his family are staying with my parents saving up to buy a house. My young niece is sleeping in my old room and loves the poster. She told me that when she grows up, she will come and live with me in Paris. Another generation of Francophile is on the horizon. Mr. Chevalier and I planned out where I would go on my first visit and I had a standing invitation to visit with his family. His brother has a daughter about the same age as me who became my first French pen pal. Mr. Chevalier had decide to move back to Paris and we made plans for me to visit but when I was about to graduate from high school, I got word that he passed away suddenly. I cried for over a month.

My best friend AJ wanted us to go to a HBCU (Historical Black College Universities) but I wanted New York (my other passion). The night I graduated from high school was one of the best I had up to that point. I got accepted to New York University, and my parents gave me a two week trip to Paris. I think I made the same noise as when my mom gave me the beret. I have so many questions, how does one act when one is about to live their dream? Oh my god what will the weather be like? What will I wear? Will I be sophisticated enough? Will they know I am not Parisian? I didn't sleep for a week too excited. The moment the plane landed, that feeling of I've been here before hit me and I knew instantly that I was right about my obsession I was home. All the way to the hotel I kept pinching myself, no I am not dreaming and that hurts.

My hotel room had a partial view of the Eiffel Tower; I stood and looked at that tower for over an hour, I can see now that two weeks will not be enough. Jet lag be damn I am in Paris. I hit the ground running; I didn't want to miss a thing. Paris was ever thing I could imagine and more. The food was unexplainable, the wine red and sweet, the people New Yorker with accents. The Eiffel Tower at night is breath taking, I went to an outdoor market and made myself a picnic lunch with farm fresh city products and ate in Parc du Champ de Mars, the park in front of the Eiffel Tower. I picked up a few things at the Galeries Lafayette Department Store; visited with Mona Lisa, stood in the long lines waiting to get into Notre Dame, explored the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, shopped at Les Puces (The Flea Market). I didn't want to leave, I was more tired than before I left home. I got compliments from the French on my speaking French, I was told it was flawless I almost wanted to cry. Before I left I spent some time with the family of Mr. Chevalier, I wanted them to know just what he meant to me, I cried all over again. As you can see I cry a lot, but that's ok when the tears are tears of joy.

I love NYU. Next to Paris New York is my second favorite place. The pace of the city, you have the United Nations pushing and shoving right next to you. If you can't find what you are looking for here forgetaboutit. The school is in the middle of the village with its bohemian vibe, funky little shops that sell funky little things to go in your funky small dorm room. The restaurants and bars that are open all night, eating here will get you fat. My small circle of friends comes from all across the country and beyond. I stay in a coed dorm so my circle includes boys as well. I am taking two majors, Business and French which is all part of my master plan for making my move. I am working part-time in this international company that has offices worldwide (see where I'm going with this) the name of the company will serve no purpose, only to get me where I want to go.

Robert and Ray are two of my co-workers that I have formed a strong bond with. Robert is 23 tall, skinny as a rail and as gay as Liberace. Ray is 26 tall, good-looking reminds me of a young Brad Pitt and is straight as an arrow. So here we are the three of us thick as thieves. You have me a young beautiful black woman who is French obsessed. Robert who is Latino, and looks better in a dress than most women I know (he makes a fabulous Gloria Estefan) and Ray a white man who comes from money and is fine as hell. All my girlfriends beg me to meet him, but he only has eyes for me so he says. We are only friends really. We hang out all the time, after work drinks, Broadway shows, Robert has showcases where he performs his drag shows, and we usually are the loudest people in the audience. I know now why I wanted to go to school in New York, we were destiny to meet, it was in the stars.

We would tell each other our dreams and ambitions; I would tell them my dream of living in an artist loft in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, drinking French wine with my French lover rubbing my French cat while eating my French chocolates. I was told in no uncertain terms that WE would be living in Paris doing all those French things.

Ray said there would be no other lover than himself and he would support us with his painting (he really is that good). Robert would become famous in his cabaret act and he would be a designer. Naturally he would design OUR loft. Oh what plans we made and all through college we kept right on dreaming. Ray's family didn't approve of this crazy friendship. They came to town one night and he told them we were going to see a show, the looks on their faces when we walked into Robert's performance of Cher singing Gypsies Tramps and Thieves was worth the price of admission only. The gay crowd was very unruly that night, talk about a Kodak moment, it was priceless.

Later Ray told me that he told his mother he was going to run away with me and Robert to Paris and live in an artist loft in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement that (Cher) I mean Robert was going to decorate he thought she was going to faint. That boy has got a wicked sick sense of humor maybe that is why we get along so well. Graduation came and went; I was hired full time with my company find a tiny apartment that was decorate by you know who and continued with my plan of one day moving to Paris. I started seeing a professor who works at NYC (no he is not my teacher, I graduated remember) He is from Cameroon which means he speaks French. Ray was understandably upset but he really likes Kunda, so he welcomed him into our fold, beside it's nothing serious. We continued with our crazy lives in New York. My parents were starting to worry I would never come home, but I did come home for holidays, birthday, anniversaries.

My grandparents were celebrating their 65 wedding anniversary so my family gave them the biggest party ever. The New York crew came with me, they wanted to meet my family and my family wanted to meet them. We had a ball, my family needs to be committed somewhere so everyone got along. Ray got drunk and announced to everyone that we were getting married. My parents were looking at me like what the hell; you told us he was just a friend. Robert decided at that moment that we needed Diane Ross so he started singing Reach out and touch somebody's hand, all the while telling everyone to image him with a long wig. One of my uncles who was as wasted as Ray joined him saying he was Marvin Gaye, We never laughed so hard in our lives; my grandparents said this was the best party ever. I love my crazy family.

I have been working now for 2 years loving my job, my friends, New York and Kunda. Things are starting to get serious between us after we took a few months break, things were moving a bit too fast for me, remember I have plans and marriage is not in the picture at least not now. My best friend from home decided to stay in Washington DC after graduating from Howard University, and is getting married, so I spent a lot of time between New Jersey and DC. My mind was so preoccupied with wedding plans, that I didn't notice that Ray was not around as much as he was before. I came back to work after taking a long weekend and was told he hadn't been in the office for a week. I called his apartment, sent him numerous texts, and tried his cell phone, nothing. Robert called his family in New Jersey but he was told under no circumstance would they give out any information on Ray, it was a family matter. I started freaking out, what the hell is going on? Why all this secrecy?

Robert and I tried everyone we could think of trying to find out any information. Nothing, we went to the police who spoke with his family, they came back and told us he had to go away on family business. I knew that was a lie, but there was nothing we could. The wedding was coming up but my heart was not in it. How could a person just disappear? My mother spoke to me and said AJ is your oldest friend, I know your heart is hurting but you need to think of her. I put my best face forward and for a day I was able to smile and mean it. The wedding was beautiful, I look at AJ and think of her as my little best friend with two teeth missing, and here she is somebody's wife.

I was helping her get ready when she turned to me and said you are next I feel it. You and Kunda will be next. I don't know about that, what about my plans for Paris? Girl all that was is talk. Don't let that man slip through your fingers. You will be the first to know (pause) when I move to Paris. We both fall on the bed laughing.

Robert is sitting at my desk when we look up and who comes walking by Ray. I almost knocked him down I was hugging him so hard. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks, he was half the size he was before. As I looked up I could see that he had lost some of his hair. I prayed to God that the look on my face didn't match what I was feeling inside. I looked at Robert and we both started crying. "CANCER" how could you not tell us of all people, I didn't want anyone to know he said. I had cancer when I was younger and we thought since I was healthy that I had beaten it, but it returned right after the New Year. I was going to tell you but you were busy with the wedding, I was glad you had that as a distraction. I didn't want to tell Robert without you, saying it twice would have killed me. I don't know how long the three of us stood there hugging and crying, but the whole office was watching there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

Later in my apartment the three of us drinking, Robert said we will just move our plans up and leave sooner than we had anticipated, there is no way we would move to Paris without you, this is a package deal. I can't even think about that I said. Listen Ray said I'm not dead yet, let's get drunk so we did. Ray was going for treatment was looking better than he had in a long time. His hair started growing back and he came back to work. We were whole again, and just as fast as he was well, he passed away. He was 30 years old. His family didn't want us at the funeral and most definitely didn't want us to speak, but Ray had things prearranged and there was nothing they could do about it. The day of the funeral was perfect if there is such a thing on a sorrowful day as today. Robert of course being Robert came wearing a big red hat with a long veil in the front; he was following Ray's wishes to stick it to his family one last time. I could barely speak through crying, but I let those SOB's know that Ray had another family in New York who loved him more because we didn't judge and we let Ray be Ray, never wanted anything from him except love. He told me he got more love from us than a lifetime of family with a broom stick up their asses. Robert gave me a standing ovation, and we walked out of that church with our heads held high, drinking a bottle of rum in his memory. Me with my tear stained face, Robert in his red veil.

I think of him every day, the crying is less but the memories are still fresh. Robert and I don't smile as much as we use to. This too shall pass my mother says. My boss calls me in his office a position is available in our Paris office would I be interested. This is my big moment everything I had done in the past was to get me to this point, I should be dancing on his desk but my heart is still broken, I am numb. I can give you a week but after that the door will close.

I go to find Robert but he is not at his desk, I don't see him for the rest of the day, but he calls me at home crying. Ray is in a better place I told him, I know it still hurts, but we will get through this, I promise. He is quiet for some time I love you he said I will see you tomorrow. Ray's death affected him more than I thought.

The next day no Robert, my mind is racing and my heart feels like it has stopped beating, I start seeing pictures of him in my mind's eye and for the first time I start to see just how skinny he really is. He was born skinny but now reality is slapping me in the face, PLEASE LORD NOT AGAIN. I call his partner Benny who informs me Robert is in the hospital, I drop the phone as I am running out the door. You know you are in New York when the sight of a black woman running through the streets crying her eye doesn't attract any attention.

I get to the hospital just as Robert is being taken up for tests, I see Benny who is with Robert's mother they both are crying, what is happening? "AIDS" I almost pass out, what? Why? How? Robert doesn't look sick, this can't be happening again. His mother came over and gave me a hug, Robert has had aids for over two years the cocktail he was taking worked well for him, but now his body is weak due to what we thought was a cold, but really it is walking pneumonia.

All I see is darkness, the next thing I know they are helping off the floor. I was able to go and see him but I had to wear a mask. Don't give me any shit he says I didn't want you to know, I know how you handle things, especially after Ray passed away. I couldn't bear to think I could make you look like that. Now listen, I need to say something. I have loved you from the first day you waked into that office, stepping so fierce, I knew we would be friends; you were everything I knew you would be. You accepted me no question asked. I will always remember us.

My mother knows what I want down to a tee. So no more tears, make me proud, no black and I want all the divas playing at my coming out party, that's what I want a BIG FABULOUS NEW YORK VILLAGE PARTY. I want smiles and laughter and you my dear will look fabulous in all red. I smiled, can I borrow your hat that you wore at Ray's party of course my darling it's yours. I kiss him and leave so that he may have time with his family. The phone rings and a very soft voice says bitch if you don't get your black ass on that plane for Paris, Ray and I will haunt you forever. Now my mother will give you some of my ashes along with a picture of Ray that will be burned with me. Once you are in Paris release us darling at the same time Grace Jones better be playing loud in the background. Now don't argue with a dying man and always remember we love you very much.

I held that phone for hours, now we are down to one. Robert's party was the things legends are made from. Everything he wanted he got. I did look fabulous in red. I walked into the funeral to Bad Girls by Donna Summers, the place was packed and nobody was crying. This was truly a celebration of life. I never knew just how many friends Robert had. He was loved by friends and especially his family. I wish all gay people could be accepted for who they are by their families the way he was. I know I will love him forever. Both he and Ray are now a part of me and will live on within me. They were in my life for such a brief moment, but the impact will never die, I will remember them always.

I am on the phone with Kunda waiting for my flight to take off. Call me as soon as you land he said. I will as soon as I get there. You got everything you need he asked, looking around yes I am sure I have everything. Robert and Ray are safe and secure, we should land around 8:30 am Paris time. Listen I said they are calling my flight, ok have a safe flight and by the way I love you. I smiled I know I love you too I said. Waiting in line for my luggage at Charles De Gaulle airport, someone walks by and I hear La Vie En Rose playing. I look up smiling saying to myself, ok boys that's our cue. Paris HERE WE COME.