

The Girl in the Red Beret

Miss O'Connor needs the February issue mock-up on her desk by next week Monday morning. Tomorrow is Wednesday, I have less than a week. Crap, tomorrow is Wednesday. She wanted a meeting with Mr. Segreto from Vogue Italia. That man's impossible to get a hold of. Oh, and the new models are coming tomorrow at 4 so she can pick the outfits for the next issue. Is Victoria part of next month's models? She can't be, especially after the situation from last month. God, so many things to worry about.

I rub my head as I round the corner to my dusty, little home.

Sigh. Home. Sweet. Home.

I turn the rusty knob and step into the dark and crowded studio that I now call home.

Tossing my keys on the counter, I peel my coat off of myself, a difficult task given the considerable amount of sweat on my skin from just climbing up seven flights of stairs. I lazily throw the coat onto the couch, fling my beret onto the wobbly wooden mannequin head loaded with necklaces I never wear, and my aching body sinks into the puffy armchair with a *ploof* as the chair sighs beneath me. I look at the mannequin on the mantle, a ratty old thing I got from a yard sale two years ago, but with the beret, it has an odd sense of comfort.

I've had that beret for a little more than five years now. It was actually a gift from a local girl I met one day in Paris, around Christmas of 2003. I was flying to Strasbourg to visit a distant aunt for my mother who was sick and unable to go, and Paris was a layover. I had a good eight or nine hours before my next flight, so I decided to explore the city. Brilliant choice really, for a girl who, despite being of French blood, barely spoke any French other than a mere "baguette" or "croissant."

But that day was special. I just had a feeling, something inside me, telling me to go explore the city. The sky was a beautiful blue, dotted lightly with fluffy white clouds and the air filled with the sweet aroma of fresh-baked pastries.

Following the saliva-inducing scent, I found myself entering an adorable little bakery, where a little old lady with silvery hair stood behind a counter. “Ummm..... Un croissant de chocolate? Um, merci?” I awkwardly smiled at the lady as she nodded, seemingly understanding my very broken and obviously-tourist French. She placed the croissant in a bag and handed it to me, followed by rapidfire French, which I only assumed to be the price. Dumping my assorted euros and dollars onto the counter, I let her pick out the right currency and amount. I threw the rest back in my purse, thanked her awkwardly a few times, and left the shop.

I wandered around the cobblestone streets as I nibbled on the croissant, taking in the vine-covered walls of buildings and the colorful outfits of the locals. The buildings were all pink and blue and yellow, much more vibrant than any of the dreary Brooklyn brownstones I was used to. The animals were cuter too, maybe it was the environment around them or just the fact that French animals are different. I saw a family of ducks walking in a row, the mother at the front with the babies behind her and the father at the end. I followed them for a while, then found myself lost. Oopsie.

Spinning around and looking for familiar windows, landmarks, plants, anything, I realized I had only been staring at cobblestones and feathers for the past twenty or so minutes. I tried to Google Maps my way back to the shop, but of course my phone was dead. There were no people around to ask either, so I started heading backwards, but soon found a bigger issue – an intersection.

Shit. Which way do I turn? Or do I go straight? Hmmmmm. Did I turn earlier? I think so.... Maybe.... Maybe not....

I kept looking at the streets in the intersection, debating over which corner looked more familiar, but coming up empty every time. After half an hour of standing and turning and looking and wracking my head for any memories of things other than ducks and stone roads, I saw a person! I ran up to this girl, who seemed about the same age as me, and by her bright red beret and French school uniform, was a local.

“Hi! Um... I. Me. (pointing at myself) Am. Lost. Can. You. (pointing at her) Help. Me (pointing at myself again)?” I enunciated each word carefully as I added hand motions and facial expressions to try to help her understand me. My effort was clearly a failure, as the girl just smiled at me sweetly, totally lost as to what I said. I repeated myself a few times, drawing question marks in the air, spinning around, pointing at places, until I thought she got the hint.

“Oh!” she nodded a few times and smiled at me. “Eiffel Tower! Tourist? Go?”

Oh. She thinks I'm trying to find the Eiffel Tower. She did get the tourist part right though. Um, the Eiffel Tower isn't exactly my goal, but I mean, I'm sure there's a bunch of tourists there and some are bound to speak English, and might help me figure out my way back to the airport. So sure, why not?

“Yes! Can. You. Take. Me. There?” I went back to the aimless game of charades with her, my arms flying around and face distorted in weird expressions. “Um, go?” I pointed towards the tiny tip of the Eiffel Tower peeking through the tops of buildings behind me.

“Oui. Oui.” She smiled at me and took my arm in hers, as if we were best friends already, and before I knew it, I was walking off with a stranger. Sigh, what would my mother say if she knew? Probably “YOU IDIOT! HAVE YOU LEARNED NOTHING? WHAT ABOUT

STRANGER DANGER?” Well Mom, she seemed like a nice enough girl and I was lost. What choice did I have?

I followed her as she pulled me and guided me into this tiny alley and that narrow street, very clearly a local. We were making decent progress as the tip of the tower started to get a little bigger through the rooftops in front of us. Until we got to a fabric shop.

The girl dragged me in, against my protests of “Uh? Eiffel Tower? Go? Yes?” and took me past all the hanging fabrics and all the way to the back, where a woman who looked identical, but older, sat. I assumed it was her mom, and greeted her in a succession of broken French consisting mostly of “hi” and “merci” and to be honest, I don’t know what I was thanking her for. I don't think I was thanking her for anything, it was just a polite-ish word in my very limited French vocabulary. They talked to each other in French, and the girl pointed to me every few sentences. Her mom seemed fine with her daughter taking a stranger around the city, so we said our short goodbyes and left.

We kept walking and soon came across a guy playing the guitar in the middle of a plaza. People were gathered around him, singing and dancing. There was laughter and joy everywhere, the scene looked like it was right out of a movie. The girl poked at me as she started singing and dancing, trying to get me to join her. Once again, I protested and tried to get her to take me to the Eiffel Tower, but she was persistent. She moved my arms for me, and jumped in circles around me, getting me to dance. I caved and started dancing along with the crowd. We laughed as we danced as she sang and I hummed to the music, and for the first time in my life, I felt free. It really was like a movie, impromptu dance and all. Happiness flowed out of me as we laughed and danced until the musician stopped playing.

The guy then started playing a slow song, and so we left and continued walking. We tried to talk as we walked, but it was really just her pointing at different buildings and places and talking about them. I think. I'm really not sure at all. But she seemed so thoroughly interested by what she was talking about, the way her eyes lit up and smiled as her cheeks became pink with energy and excitement. I let her keep talking and just enjoyed the things she pointed out. Everything was beautiful, really as if I were inside a painting.

But of course, she got distracted again. And again. And again. She pulled me into bakeries where she bought cakes and buns and desserts and practically shoved them down my throat as she tried to get me to taste them all. She took me down a street full of stall vendors and bought us these matching metal butterfly pins, dainty little things but minimalistic and elegant. We did some more shopping and walking and even visited a few ponds with willow trees and foxtail grass. It was as if she understood that I'd be leaving soon and wanted to show me all of Paris in one day.

She was right though. I did have to leave soon. It got dark pretty quickly and I realized I might miss my 10 pm flight if we didn't hurry up. Luckily, we got to the Eiffel Tower just as I was worrying about my flight.

"Merci, merci." I thanked her abundantly and gave her a hug. She smiled at me and waved as I turned to leave. But suddenly, I felt a tug on her arm. I turned around and it was her, pulling on my arm. I look at her confused, thinking I'd forgotten something.

She smiled her sweet little smile and took her red beret off. She looked at it, then looked at me, and extended her hands out, presenting me the beret. "You." She pointed at me, and placed the beret on my head.

"Are you sure?" I tried to give the beret back, but she insisted.

“No. You,” She pointed at me again. She reached for my butterfly pin on my shirt, took it off, and pinned it on the beret while it was on my head. Then she took her own pin off her shirt, held it near my pin on the beret, and smiled.

“You. Me,” She put her pin back on her shirt, gave me a hug, a wave, turned, and walked off into the darkness. I stood there shocked, not by the fact that she gave me a beret, because I mean it was only a hat, but by the strength and the value of that whole interaction. We formed a bond in a mere few hours stronger than many bonds I’d formed over years.

I later found an American family of five who was also going to the airport that night and let me share their taxi. I got to the airport on time and got to Strasbourg. The rest of that trip was nothing eventful, just visiting an aunt I’d never seen before and then returning home to New York.

Shaking my head, I look back at the red beret, that metal butterfly pin still on it, though very crooked. I get out of the chair and walk up to the mantle, picking up the beret. My right thumb brushes over the pin, now covered in that typical black rust. I fix the pin and lightly set the beret back down on the mannequin head.

I never even got her name. I didn't understand more than five words that she said that day. I haven't thought about that day in years. Yet for some reason, I feel something right now. Friendship? Lack thereof? I don't know. But that girl was special, a real inspiration in life. A "character," as some would say. To me, she's the girl in the red beret.