

Paris Chez Moi

by

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For hours I used to lie awake, tracing familiar routes on a well-worn map of Paris even after I had memorized every cobblestone and every line of scrawled graffiti along the way. Sometimes, even now, I peek back at my convenient little notebook, pages frayed, smeared to the end of legibility, full of faint, penciled-in landmarks, at once upsetting me and rousing wanderlust with its notes and sketches, a year's worth of hoarded ideas and thoughts, aspirations and impulses.

I arrived in August, when the only Parisians still in Paris are hotel staff, tour guides, and professional thieves who prey on clueless tourists. That wasn't going to be me, equipped with practical shoes and an anti-theft bag strapped firmly across my chest. I dropped my suitcases at the Auberge Internationale des Jeunes without unpacking and left the keys to my room on the receptionist's desk in a hurry, anxious to get away from the other ugly Americans and to see the city I'd read about for so long. I was out for only an hour, still suffering from jet lag despite my excitement. I came back to find my keys missing and discovered the door to my room hanging open and my suitcases flung across the room. I knelt on the floor, defeated, compulsively searching for the laptop and camera that I knew would not be there. The thieves rummaged through everything. Those filthy hands even leafed through my books! And my notebooks! Still numb with disbelief, I leaned over my window overlooking rue Trousseau to curse the unsuspecting Parisians. They looked back up at the darkening sky, concerned only with fashionable shoes and the end of tourist season.

I went to the police the next day. The officers treated my case with an unfeigned indifference, as though grand thefts happened every day, which no doubt they do here in summer. A simple report turned into a laborious lesson in French. And this was to be my memorable, my inescapable first conversation ever, in French, with French people. I relied on my textbook vocabulary, which failed, because in school, I'd only learned how to discuss women's clothing, pastries, and the grandeur of France. Nobody ever taught me how to describe reality.

It didn't occur to me until much later what losing my laptop and camera meant. For days I sulked around Paris borrowing digital cameras so that I could take pictures to send back home, proof that I was actually here. I couldn't message or email anyone. In a sense, I was cut off from the rest of the world, keeping contact only with my immediate surroundings. Like a forced abstinence. But soon, I grew accustomed to having to walk around and search for the nearest grocery store or *boulangerie* on foot, instead of just looking it up on Google Maps. It was important for me to find the market the shortest distance away from my apartment. After all, I had to carry everything all the way home on foot. This minor inconvenience made even walking a challenge, though Parisians didn't notice this problem. They shopped and ate for each meal individually.

In any case, I could not afford to be without my map, saving me from looking too lost or walking aimlessly. Sooner or later I learned how to fare as a discreet tourist, angling my notebook, just so, to make sure no one else on the metro saw the panic on my face when I had

missed the stop for Opéra. I learned how to use monuments to find my way. I learned how to find the Seine, and once I'd found that, I could find almost anything. No matter where you are in Paris, lower building numbers lead to the Seine. I used the map inside my notebook like a crutch as I blundered through Paris. Like some tick of writing, I developed a tendency to organize everything I saw into sentences, giving grammar to the world and turning Paris into a text. I wanted the same understanding as an expat who has been living here for years, even decades; I wanted a coherent, mappable world.

I lived alone at 39 avenue Daumesnil at the edge of the undesirable 12e arrondissement, underneath the Viaduc des Arts, whose lofty arches had supported trains from Bastille to Vincennes until 1859. A giant gate separated my street from a large courtyard of several apartment buildings. From my window I could see families loafing in living rooms, students reading by lamplight and meals served three times a day. It was like a scene from *Rear Window*, and we would watch each other silently across the concrete courtyard. This was considered low-income housing in Paris: sizable courtyards, modern buildings with steel frames and working elevators, and iron gates instead of old doorways. My part of town was like nothing I'd seen walking around in the older, more scenic parts of Paris.

On a rare, balmy afternoon in October, I went out to Boulevard Haussmann in search of the perfect horse-chestnut tree to photograph with my old, lo-fi Holga camera, which the thieves had left behind. The grandiose limestone façades of the glittering Galeries Lafayette, seven stories high, immediately attracted me. Like one of Émile Zola's matrons, I could not resist the heaps of cheap goods and shining window displays luring throngs of shoppers in and out of the department store. I walked into this ladies' paradise and saw that the interior atrium was decorated with colored glass and intricate gilt moldings even more glorious than the exterior façades. I stood on the ground floor, gawking up at the scene above me: sales associates in black scurrying from one corner to the next while their clients never looked up from racks of clothes, the pinks and blues and reds and golds flashing in every greedy eye. Nobody even noticed the astounding ceiling, an authentic creation of the 1800s, and not fabricated like L.A.'s wood-and-plaster imitations of luxury and splendor.

I made my way down Boulevard Haussmann in awe. I realized why most tourists come to this city: the grand, classic architecture is as alluring as the heaps of cheap goods and shining window displays of the Galeries Lafayette. In the buildings of Paris, the French have created an international architectural wonder, a façade attracting millions of tourists each year. As in the case of the Galeries, it doesn't matter whether you need to go to a particular destination or not. From afar, the ubiquitous images of the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, and Café de Flore were at the core of the classic image of Paris that was marvelously unreal and too picturesque. I couldn't believe that people lived like this every day, running out for coffee or laundry detergent or toilet paper into these streets.

But I was looking for the Paris I already knew – the Paris of art, literature, and photographs, a Paris I'd seen from a distance, mediated. No, I did not find that perfect horse-chestnut tree on Boulevard Haussmann. Instead I decided, giving up on originality, to go to the Jardin du Luxembourg across the Seine and down the Boulevard St. Michel. My idea was to stage a *déjà vu*, hoping that I could make sense of the city this way, imposing some kind of social map, as Hemingway had. Or in film montages set in Paris. I didn't realize that this mappable world was what I was seeing all around me until I began photographing it and writing about it myself.

But then, I had already seen all the streets of Paris in which I walked, and in the end I would tour all of them in one night's dream: streets in late summer, where café chairs faced the street even with the littlest strip of sidewalk. Streets where, in the wintry chill, arcades have sheltered weary *flâneurs* since the nineteenth century. As I searched for the Paris I knew, my wonderment only increased, but I could not express the familiar foreignness I felt at such intrusions of allusive beauty into a city where I had forged my new, adopted identity. That is, not until my façade also melted into the landscape. I was at that age, nervous, reserved, insecure, intimidated by everything, and all I could see was the familiar Paris that was already written about, from the point of view of other foreigners. And never my own.

For an entire semester I roamed the city mostly alone, living a life relatively solitary, with passing elations, adventures, love stories. In the 12th arrondissement, long after my French classes ended for the day, I would take to the path I traced in my notebook the night before. Every now and then I would pass by a plaque commemorating a poet or novelist or some lost soul that would lead me, naturally, to think about that place and imagine how it had been written and overwritten and then blacked out and written over again through the centuries—the city as palimpsest. Or I would run into something I'd read about from *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway's European expat masterpiece. The Café de Flore—now full of tourists and old French men in suits for show—is a well known landmark that captures the exported image of Paris that tourists come to see. This is what I thought to be the heart of Paris, the reason behind Paris's cultural longevity. But upon examining it further, I realized it wasn't really Paris at all and it was only an image.

I was the type of tourist who longed for authenticity. But all I could get was an annotated version, like the imaginative form of a double-decker bus tour. I found my antiquated Paris spoiled by tourists, which was half of who I was, too, after all. I respected the tourist version of Paris no more than I respected myself. I decided then that I would seek out the *ventre de Paris*, the underbelly of the gleaming façade that the city center hides so well.

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After spending the first few months avoiding Americans and checking off landmarks, I began to feel the sting of anonymity in a big city and pined for company. I categorically despised all Anglophones who were not already my friends. West was the exception. His first name is actually Robert, the name he gives to French people since they can pronounce it. But everyone else knew him as West. He was more standoffish than the rest, not as easily excited about pastries and bar hopping as the girls in my program (there are about four girls to every guy in almost all Paris study-abroad programs). West had a camera, too—a better one than mine—and a photographer's instinct. We would wander the parks and squares of Paris, taking pictures of old men and young women smoking with grave, unusual beauty. I invented stories for West's images, drawing from books I lent to him, books like Colette's *The Vagabond* and Anaïs Nin's *Henry and June*. He devoured them. During the day, we'd take long walks down the Rue de Rivoli during which we'd sometimes talk about Colette and Henry Miller, speaking only in French or not speaking at all. He liked to think of us as Bonnie and Clyde but all I could think about were Serge Gainsbourg's duet with Brigitte Bardot and their short-lived affair afterwards—we were in no way dating. I liked to think of him as a male muse, tall, dark-haired, fashionable. Our only enduring romance was never with each other but with Paris, and we were the two mistresses, plotting against our cheating lover.

“Look at that,” I said, pointing towards the Eiffel Tower from the café atop Centre Pompidou. It had been another dreary day in November, but the sun just broke through the clouds in time for it to set behind the tower.

“I think this is my favorite view of Paris,” I said.

“Why is that?” West asked.

“Because you can see it.”

We were standing right up against the glass, barely shielded from the icy wind blustering across the open-air café.

“Look at all those people down there... And there, is that the Sacré-Coeur?” I asked, pointing at the glowing white silhouette floating ominously above the city.

“Yeah, I think so,” said West, looking through the lens of his camera.

“Up here, you can see the other monuments that people view all of Paris from, like us. But you can also see people directly below, or across the way at those windows over there,” I said, watching a group of people drinking wine around a living room.

West zoomed in with his camera.

“What are they doing?” I asked, begging for a made-up story about their lives. We ignored how creepy it seemed to be spying through someone’s window. But they knew the Centre Pompidou was there, full of sightseers, and they occasionally glanced out the window, too.

“I’ve always imagined what was going on inside people’s apartments,” I said. “Every time someone opens one of those heavy French doors, I look inside. I imagine entire lives growing up in one of those vast apartments with its creaky wooden floors and weird, crooked doorknobs. Have you noticed those doorknobs?”

West looked up from his camera and then at me, laughing. We left the dinner party across the way and descended the escalator to find our own.

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One night a friend of mine brought me to Le Motel, a bar near my apartment, but tucked away in the 11th arrondissement away from the trashy Bastille bars. I agreed to go even though we would be seeing an American DJ. I was surprised at how close this little bar was, a ten-minute walk. Inside, Le Motel was only marginally larger than my *studette*, and its small size made it seem like a living room, with the same jumbled medley of posters and stickers that were in mine. The bar could miraculously accommodate a DJ booth, an impressive wrap-around bar in the middle, and the regulars, close to dying of laughter as they drank and danced to the American music spinning. Sometimes the door would open and a rush of cool air would temporarily relieve the foggy windows, while the noise of our festivities would flood the quiet neighborhood. Around here, residential buildings towered no higher than three or four floors, and bedrooms and kitchens seemed to extend out onto the street where you could hear entire arguments for hours. There was a bouncer outside Le Motel, responsible for keeping loud and intoxicated smokers down a block to the main cross-street, avenue Ledru-Rollin, where cars and motorcycles were louder, though he never asked for I.D.

At the bar, it was our accents that gave us away. One of the proprietors Djavid, whose Indian parents lived in the UK and in France, spoke first in English, smiling as he did, in a velvety British-Indian accent that I was more accustomed to hearing. But when he spoke French, after I insisted on speaking French when in France, his dark features transformed, at once

becoming charming and transparent. He spoke lower in French, rounding out each guttural sound and he immediately resembled any François or Jean-Pierre out there in a t-shirt. Usually I'd have been embarrassed at being found out, but he was sincere and less intimidating to talk to than other French people. I made my first French friend that night.

We frequented the bar at least three times a week, dropping by for a cheap glass of wine or beer, putting those hours of French grammar to use. Mostly it was the barmen we got to know—most of them not ethnically French—and the barmen we kept coming back for. Le Motel became the usual spot, a living room in the middle of the city, where Djavid introduced me to other English-speaking French kids, who then introduced me to a new Paris. *Le ventre* was not as grave or sordid as I had imagined. I found a version of my city—tangible, comely, and most importantly, believable—the way all Parisians have their arrondissements, their cafés, their bars and restaurants. For the most part, I stopped wandering in search of a bygone city, and stopped stripping it for pieces of a palimpsest that were a part, only a part, of a dream.

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Between semesters, West moved to Bordeaux where he would continue studying oenology, and my other friends from home moved back to California. I was the only one dissatisfied with one semester in Paris so I had decided at the last minute that I would stay, enrolling in a new study abroad program at the Sorbonne. I moved to the 14th arrondissement, a fifteen minute walk away from the last metro stop on line 4, Porte d'Orléans, on Boulevard Brune. I was so far away from the center of the city (in terms of walking) but I relished living in one of the few arrondissements that had no daunting monument overshadowing it. There are only the catacombs, which are thankfully underground. The 14th arrondissement, unlike the center of the city, is untouched by Haussmann's renovations. During his era, the 14th was just an unincorporated suburb of Paris whose low buildings looked old and a bit shabby, not in the way the rest of Paris looked old and well preserved. Cafés and parks in the 14th lacked the flair and elegance of central Paris, catering to a more working-class clientele of early risers who wore leather jackets and caps to keep the cold out. My building on Boulevard Brune was another subsidized apartment complex, populated mostly by students who commuted to the Sorbonne, though it was nothing like an American dormitory. I would see other students carrying backpacks and groceries from Le Champion, a supermarket chain ubiquitous in the French suburbs. I knew I was living at the fringes when I began shopping for my groceries at the only extra-large supermarket I'd seen in Paris instead of the street markets and small specialized food stores you see in *Amélie*, where only the wealthy can shop nowadays. I finally escaped the unreal façades and found a part of Paris that had not been exhausted in literature or in film.

I didn't mind moving away from the center where most people long to dwell in. Living here felt more authentic to me, among people whom I equated to the French version of me had I been born here: modest, born to an immigrant family, a little bit indignant. I embraced my new persona, feeling like I'd gone the other extreme and resolved to discover the outer bounds of Paris.

At a bar in an outer arrondissement, I ran into a French acquaintance I'd met briefly at a music festival in the desert and then ran into later, coincidentally, at my school in California. We'd only spoken once back then. His accent was heavy and I barely understood what he was saying since he was so tall and I'm so short. After this third serendipitous encounter, we exchanged numbers and became more than passing acquaintances. I could finally pronounce his

name, Baptiste. “Bapteezy,” as he liked to call himself, became my new, witty and unsparing travel companion. At first, we spoke English because he said he needed to practice after several months of being back home. I complied, putting friendship over fluency, though I didn’t think he needed help since he knew English well enough. He regularly dropped enduring 90’s slang like “Yo!,” “Word,” and “That’s the bomb!”—funny vocabulary for a guy with black horn-rimmed glasses perched on a Roman nose.

We were technically going to the same school, the Sorbonne, but a week after we resumed the second semester, the faculty cancelled classes in protest against reforms proposed by the Ministry of Education. My study abroad program held a mandatory meeting to discuss the events. What I thought would be a lesson in the French school system turned into an announcement that we will all be transferring schools, keeping in line with our home universities’ requirements. I was forced to enroll in a private university, L’Institut Catholique de Paris, whose students were not at all like my 14th arrondissement neighbors. Disappointed that I would be leaving the Sorbonne, I enrolled in a class that vaguely pertained to what was happening at the Sorbonne, a class on the history of political ideas.

I asked Baptiste about the protests. He told me he was part of the inner circle of students who planned protests and drafted slogans and declarations.

“That sounds like 1968!” I said, drawing loose connections to the notorious student revolution that happened in France (a model for 1960’s student protests all around the world, including Berkeley).

“I hope not,” Baptiste said. I forgot that 1968 had turned into a flop, no matter how memorable. He reminded me.

“What else are you doing? You need to explain it to me! Did you know I’m writing about 1968 for my class, ‘Histoire des idées politiques?’ It would be great if I included a section addressing the recent strikes.”

“It would be hard,” he said, always discouraging. “And I can’t tell you anyway. *C’est un secret!* But yeah, it’s a little bit like ’68. Tomorrow we will be meeting at L’Amphithéâtre Richelieu and then we start marching from Place du Panthéon.”

“Will it be violent?” I asked.

“Maybe,” he said, hopeful.

Baptiste was in his last year at the Sorbonne, working towards a Master’s Degree in history. Though class was not in session, he still went to the library every day to work on his dissertation, *L’objet guerrier: nouvelles approches*, essentially about the history of violence in war. Of course. One day while I was at Bibliothèque Saint-Geneviève, where all the undergrads went, Baptiste called and asked if I wanted to babysit his apartment.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I’m going to the countryside for a while to visit my Mom in Bergerac. Me and my brother Timoté are going to try and build a bomb that explodes by itself. Like a Molotov cocktail.”

“WHAT?! What do you mean? Baptiste...”

“Don’t worry, we’re going to test it out in the countryside. There are only trees.”

“Where did you get that idea?”

“Somebody told me. I think it’s going to get crazy, yo! You know what happened in Greece? The riots? I think that is going to—what’s the word?”

“Uh... affect??” I said.

“No, no, no.. spiral! Yeah, I think that is going to spiral out to here! Dude, I think it’s going to get violent so be careful. OK, I have to write. Come over later so you can pick up my key.”

After he left, I settled in his apartment on Rue de Turenne in the trendy Marais for a few days—I couldn’t resist pretending to live here, as much as I liked the 14th arrondissement. Baptiste only lived here because his grandfather owned the building and let him live in what were once the maid’s quarters for free; but he was a self-proclaimed anarchist trapped in a bourgeois house amid a well-to-do family line.

The space was small and smelled of cedar and mold like most of the Marais. It was the ideal apartment for a student: cramped, colorful, books stuck on every ledge, shelf and table. One particular shelf stored Baptiste’s coveted English books. He left one out for me to read, Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero*, one of his favorites. The book is set in L.A. and tells of a college student named Clay who moves in a 1980’s scene of drugs, sex and vice. It read a lot like Baptiste’s antics while he was studying abroad in California. Perhaps his equivalent to my Hemingway. I wondered then what he thought of my current escapades, trying to understand the protests through 1968, secretly hoping that it would turn into something I could write about. But of course, none of it would live up to my expectations, just as Baptiste had found out that California was not a meaningless wasteland for manic highs and morbid lows, as it was in Ellis’s 1980’s. What I took for the real Paris—the 14th arrondissement, the protests, Baptiste—was in danger of collapsing once again.

The day after I read the relatively short book, I suddenly felt indifferent about all the protests. I met with West at Le Loir dans la Théière, a tea café nearby. He was also enjoying the protests but for a different reason. Now he could visit the big, cosmopolitan city all he wanted instead of being stuck in the provincial abbreviation of Paris.

“Baptiste is leaving for a while,” I told him, pouring a cup of tea.

“Oh? Are the protests blowing over?” he asked, concerned.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like he wants them to. I still don’t get what it’s all about exactly.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said.

Baptiste came back without any explosives. The protests, like most demonstrations, lulled over time, squandering everyone’s interest. There was the threat of still having to take exams at the end of semester despite the aggravation. Still more concerned with grades and being held back a year, students filed to the libraries to make up for lost time. West insisted we find other things to do while the protests blew over, so we occupied our evenings stomping through the city like savvy tourists again. Baptiste knew all the cool bars in the 20th arrondissement where drinks were cheap and people less *snob*, bars like Le Motel; he showed us the Paris I never would have seen just as a tourist. I even introduced him to my familiar hangout at Le Motel as it grew more and more popular among the other American students abroad. During the day, West found all the hot galleries and exhibits, always stopping around 4 p.m. at Chez Prune or Point Ephemère along the Canal St. Martin for tea or an *apéritif* to study, faking our tedious French homework for something more important. The two of us were committed to speaking French exclusively, smoking packs of cigarettes a day. According to our daily loafing, we were as French as could be.

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I remember visiting a friend from back home who lived on the top floor of a limestone building on Boulevard Magenta, overlooking the bustling metro stop Barbès-Rochechouart. When I descended from the metro—for it was one of the few lines that went above ground—several men wearing leather jackets chanted, “Marlboro, Marlboro, Marlboro, trois euros, trois euros, trois euros!” in heavy Arabic accents. It was easy to avoid them since they never made eye contact with you. Instead they scanned the area, one hand in a pocket (it was cold) and the other dealing out a pack in and out of the front flap of a jacket like a deck of cards. They were looking for cops who mostly turned away and busted them only for show. I bought a pack once, even though I hate Marlboro reds—and there were two cigarettes missing out of the pack. A small service fee, I guess.

In the daytime, Barbès was peaceful enough. Men in understated thobes and Senegalese women in loud prints and baby slings seemed to occupy that entire corner on Boulevard Rochechouart where the biggest Tati (the French Wal-Mart) stood. People walked with no particular destination, sometimes loafing along smoking cigarettes (perhaps the missing Marlboros?) and catching up with other locals. Was this the new *classe ouvrière*, a working class of recent immigrants driven to the fringes and undesirable quarters of Paris? I hardly saw such a diverse group of people concentrated in one place in Paris. It reminded me of home, of something real. The colorful figures looked pleasingly out of place against the timeworn façades. But this was *bona fide* Paris, I thought, peering down at the mass of people shuffling about. West and I never made it out this far because no tourist destination or posh café landed at Barbès. Just people, living.

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After classes resumed in the middle of the second semester, West went back to Bordeaux, paying me fewer visits, and Baptiste buried himself in books, leaving me to myself again. I lost the sense of wanderlust, abandoning my maps, and relying solely on memory. I didn't want to go home. I spent my free afternoons at La Cinémathèque Française, one of the largest film archives in the world. It was once housed in the Palais de Chaillot beneath the shadow of the Eiffel Tower across the Seine, but moved to the 12th arrondissement in a modern building designed by Frank Gehry. Even on sunny days, I would watch two or three films in a row—on 35mm film reels—in a viewing cubicle. Sometimes when I got tired of that, I would see something more recent at Le Reflet Médicis or Le Champo near the Sorbonne. I found this an effective way to cope with my dwindling time in Paris. Two weeks before my departure date, without a single thing packed, I picked a gloomy film by my favorite director, Ingmar Bergman. The black and white classic was lonely, temperamental, and self-conscious—exactly how I felt. Then I read the subtitles:

The hopeless dream of being. Not seeming, but being. Every moment, alert! The tug of war—what you are with others and who you really are. The feeling of vertigo and a constant hunger to finally be exposed. To be seen through, cut down, even obliterated... Your hiding place isn't watertight. Life trickles in everywhere.

I paused the movie and scribbled the words in my notebook.

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In May, finals had ended and the familiar summer gloom had come back to the city again. Even West came back for a while. A few days before my departure, West and I walked once more down Rue de Rivoli, starting at the center of Paris. We followed the busy street past the Jardin du Tuilleries and past the Louvre until the street funneled into the Marais, where we inhaled the smell of motorcycle exhaust and freshly baked bread emanating from the *boulangerie* windows. Down a few blocks, we paused in front of the Bastille column, saluting at the golden genie of liberty at the top. We walked north until Canal St. Martin where we stopped at Chez Prune for a drink around mid-afternoon. From there we continued up the canal until we found the metro and rode it above ground, past Barbès-Rochechouart and the Marlboro cigarettes, until Anvers. Then began our long ascent up to the ghostly white Sacré-Coeur. The basilica was intentionally built on the highest point of the city, visible from almost anywhere in Paris, in the middle of the most radical neighborhood at the time it was built in 1873. It was constructed with travertine, a hardening and whitening stone that towered over the pilgrims, calling them to Perpetual Adoration, uninterrupted prayer since 1885. But unlike so many who had made the pilgrimage, we climbed to say goodbye. The wind blew down the collar of my jacket, reminding me of the wintry day atop Centre Pompidou. We were far away now, sitting on top of the basilica ledge, gazing silently at the city below. All I could recognize was the Eiffel Tower and the top of Centre Pompidou, the red and blue a striking contrast to the aged rooftops.

For the last two weeks I stayed with Baptiste after the study abroad program officially ended and I was kicked out of my apartment in the 14th. I went to the airport twice during that time, seeing American friends off and helping them haul their luggage through the metro. The third time it was my turn, Baptiste carrying the largest bag, another friend carrying the second largest, and I, the smallest—I was going home.

After I arrived back in California, I bought another notebook—this one without a map—to replace the two I had filled over the course of the year. On the first page I rewrote the scrawled words from Bergman’s “Persona” and didn’t write much else for weeks. I avoided people, cringing at the sight of supersized food and gritted smiles, and lawns and tree-lined streets devastated by the dry California heat. My family noticed a change: “Oh you’re so European now!” And I cringed again. They mistook my insouciance and detachment for a European attitude, which in some ways it could have been, but I preferred not to think of myself as French anymore. Perhaps just homesick. I quit smoking and quit avoiding people, but I continued writing and thinking about Paris, adding my own narrative like all the others who had paid homage to the fabled city. My pilgrimage, rite of passage, or whatever you want to call it, was at last real.

