

# Paris-Pratique

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## Metro Daydreams

It's the metro, not the underground. That much must be clear if I'm to get along with anyone I meet in Paris. London has an underground, the lewd "tube," and it can stay there. Chicago, sparing no extra letter, has the "L" and New York has a "subway." In Paris there is the metro, to avoid all implications of the subterranean. It's terribly efficient, running frequently and well and it crosses the whole of the city with asterisk angularity and squiddish spread. I'm very attached to it, despite the urine smell, and came to know its creases intimately over a period of three days during which I pursued a dead man I had seen once on my daily commute.

It's not the oddest thing you'll see on the metro, a dead man. God knows the place swarms with musicians, marionetters, and Mormons in unsettling quantities. If life's a song, the surreal moments we find as occasionals and accidentals are left to free fantasia on those stretches of train line, and no one makes any comment, or at least I didn't when my path crossed his against all odds.

I wouldn't have recognized him at all, enthralled as I was that day with memorizing the metro announcements in French, English, and Spanish, because he was playing the guitar, and so hated are these morning melodies by weary Parisian commuters that I'd learned it was impolite to even listen. Despite the grandeur of weirdness the white-tiled

tunnels of the metro played host for, Parisian eyes never blink. The more commotion you made, the more resolutely you were ignored. When in Rome, do as the Romans do, so in Paris I learned to imitate with incredible expression and accuracy the most inanimate of walls.

So on his guitar he strummed and I stared at my own half-a-face reflected in the train car window. I came to recognize that he was playing a certain song - "Kisses Sweeter than Wine" - which I've always associated with Mr. Craig, a frequent substitute teacher at my high school, who sang it in a low, raspy, deeply inappropriate voice to us whenever he substituted for a class, no matter the subject. I remembered rolling my eyes to the classmates who shared my struggle as we listened to the repetitive wheeze and chortle of the only songs Mr. Craig seemed to know: "Kisses Sweeter than Wine" and "Molly Malone."

I'd have recognized that same voice there in that metro car if he hadn't died more than two years prior, of health complications someone more empathetic than me would have remembered - and also if it wasn't my stop.

Les Halles?... Les Halles.

Attention à la marche en descendant du train.

Please mind the gap between the train and the platform.

Cuidado con el espacio entre el vagón y el andén.

I stepped off the metro a little sluggish and my thoughts only came together as the doors did, and turning I saw familiar elbow patches on a brown jacket, the long irregular bristles of a coarsely bearded face and a guitar that had whined about sweet irish maids to irritated high schoolers years ago. The man was slim and grey, but the guitar was voluptuous. Dark and rosewood and shiny like lacquer, with a quote painted on it (from Confucius, Mr. Craig would say) "... and should they have the strength to spare, let them spend it upon the arts."

Of the world's manifold guitars, there was one alone I would recognize, and it was speeding away from me to my right down the tunnel. It would have been line 4, and I was just between classes stepping off at Les Halles to

tread rue Rambuteau in the rain, off to the most tedious class on Comparative Healthcare ever devised. I was alone and unsettled and three months into my time translating mind-the-gaps and riding metros in the city I called the “city of the plain,” Paris, where nothing new ever catches on. I was two years removed from the days spent talking to a boy back home about Mr. Craig and his guitar after school - about how odd it was to sing Irish drinking songs in math classes. I’d pretend I found the whole display romantic, to toe the line with the boy back home’s interpretation, which always assumed the best of sad old romantics.

There, in the recirculating, sweat-moistened air of the Les Halles shopping center I was reunited with him, Mr. Craig, and just as soon denied him. The story I could have come home with rang in my head over the percussive symphony of high heels and hard shoes on cement that rang through the vaulted stairways all the way up to the surface. When I stood guarding my pockets with my hands in the fresh air, I convinced myself it hadn’t happened, to save the embarrassment of losing such a good story. I made my way past crepe stands stinking of flour and butter and amnesty international clipboard kids drifting across my path like icebergs.

## Alexander the Great

He had a voice like Capote and eyes like Caligula, wielding both to great effect in the mildest of conversations and the quietest of metro cars. If up until coming to Paris I’d presumed myself a gay man for the occasional lilt on my tongue or boy on my mind, Alex stifled my certainties. So aggressive was his presence that even at twice his height I seemed to vanish, while he glowed a great announcement of what the community terms “pride.” The first word I’d learned in traversing Paris was « pardon » which got me through with its final nasal punch as I bumped into people and was a general problem to those around me. Alex apologized for nothing.

We arrived on the same plane, wide-eyed travelers in a

distant land, jet-lagged and careless of our fate, and Alex was quick to introduce himself, unfazed by the same flight that had managed to deflate me. His energy, excitement, and attitude in the face of insurmountable jet lag carried me through the first three days of madness and exhaustion, and hadn’t dimmed throughout our time there. He believed us to be comrades, and so indulged me my visions of a dead man that night as we wound our way to line 4 to meet his friends at a left bank bar for Friday fun.

“He was playing the guitar and singing “Kisses Sweeter than Wine’.”

“And that’s important because...?” Alex asked, summoning up from his impossibly tight pants a chiming smart-phone.

“Well my old teacher only sang two songs and that was one of them. Same elbow patches, he always wore them, and same sort of hair. Same sort of... old lobster face.”

“Old lobster face?” Alex said with an injuriously raised eyebrow.

“I didn’t get a good look, but, really red cheeks, bristly beard, beady dark eyes.”

“Can we agree you don’t know what a lobster looks like?”

I tried to laugh but Alex had begun to fiddle with his phone, the first sign of an impending maelstrom. Alex had a knack for using his piping voice to strike you still across busy streets or to shoot down conversations point blank just to make room for another Youtube video. He had tablets, phones, mp3 players, and more on hand at any given moment, and enough videos to swallow up the most well-meant evening. He knew every video by heart and I could see him mouth along to them as he watched his victims pretend to watch.

This was intolerable behavior on the metro, these videos, as evidenced by the woman with the sack of laundry between her legs beside us closing her eyes in irritation as Alex wrangled with the buttons of his phone to raise the volume.

With his eyes on me I heard his voice in eerie sequence to some blogger's fresh complaint. Something tedious about unfamiliar neighbors showing up in apartment hallways. I followed the example of the wincing businessman holding on to my same grab handle and receded into myself against the noise, trying to think of a better term than lobster-faced to describe the specter I'd seen. Santa Claus had red cheeks, but Mr. Craig wasn't jolly, always drooping and melancholy,

At Reaumur-Sebastopol we changed to line 4, and waited on the platform for Aya, one of the numerous names Alex had brought up in his description of the night. When she arrived we feigned intimate French familiarity and "bised" bumping cheeks to the sounds of smooching, a total absurdity as we hadn't quite mastered our adopted mannerisms, and Aya and I had never said a word to each other until that point on the platform. She said to me,

"Did you know they sell peanut butter at Hema?"

Alex, unenthused, said, "Do you think that's what you should be spending your money on, honey? Keeps you off the runway" and gave Aya's side an accusatory pinch.

His phone suddenly spouted a blogger's commentary on the faults of stores like Hema and Target without even stopping to buffer. From the pulpit of tolerance espoused by the oft-oppressed community to which Alex and I belonged, he never failed to critique, deride, nor diminish anyone - friend or foe - for their looks, thoughts, and mannerisms, citing "because I'm gay and you're trashy." This was his particular mandate from heaven, should his authority be questioned. Such constant badgering was, to him, a sign of a healthy relationship and bespoke a strong spirit in those who could endure the onslaught, as he could.

"So you both found something you loved from America here, how cute." Alex said, pushing Aya into me, at which she joined me in the incredulous eyebrow raising that was quickly leaping from face to face in that particular traincar like a wake trailing behind Alex's voice.

"What did you find?" She asked me, as the train tore off.

"I thought I saw an old substitute teacher playing music

on the metro this morning."

"Oh cool, did you talk to him?" she asked

"Well no, we were on the metro and I just got off before I noticed him."

Alex interjected, "But how could you be miss a chance to talk to lobster face."

Aya ignored the interjection, "You're sure it was him?"

"Well no, I mean, it was definitely his guitar - he used to play guitar - and he wore the same sort of outfit, same sort of shape. He was singing the same song."

"He was singing?"

"Yeah, 'Kisses Sweeter than Wine'."

"Wouldn't you recognize his voice?"

"I mean. I think so, yeah. It's sort of raspy. He was really old, I mean, he's supposed to be dead."

Aya made Alex her audience for a beleaguered sitcom-inspired blink, "You didn't want to lead with that?"

"I mean. I thought he was dead. I'm pretty sure he's dead. So he wouldn't be singing on the metro. Cue the twilight zone theme - I guess."

"On a topic that matters, have you guys seen this? If not you need to," Alex said, cutting me off from Aya with a phone playing some favorite music video involving men showering. Aya, revealing obvious talent for dealing with Alex's electronic intercessions, delivered a snide remark about his jacket, which Alex parried with a slight at what he dubbed her "Cleopatra-bang-me-bangs."

At Réaumur-Sébastopol we changed to line 4 and Aya probed me about Mr. Craig. This metro car was more crowded, and loud, and in the American fashion we raised our voices over the dull roar in order to be heard, exacerbating the problem. At my height I comfortably talked over Alex's head at Aya.

"I'd love to catch him again in the metro, just to shock everyone back home with the story - Mr. Craig is alive and well and living in Paris."

A person bumped against me, and we exchanged a polite « pardon » to each other, which undoes most affronts that happen on the metro.

“You sort of have to think he’s living it up while he’s dying from cancer or something, right?” Alex said, “Doing the “Eat Pray Love” thing.”

“Yet all three of those things are exactly what no one does on the metro,” I said.

“Where are we getting off?” Aya asked.

“Here, metro Odéon,” I said. “The place where odes are sung.”

“Okay Webster’s, I’m pretty sure that’s not what it means,” said Alex, “there’s a statue of Odéon at the stop, it’s a guy.”

I attempted a stiff pace out of the metro car to put some distance between myself and Alex.

“Probably from the French revolution,” he added, as he passed me. Alex went everywhere at a half-gallop so he could have the pleasure of turning his head back and hissing “Can we all stop moving at a glacial pace” to anyone behind him. We climbed the very shallow stairs of Odéon metro stop as he did so, to be greeted by its statue of George Jacque Danton, near Odéon Theater. Alex’s bar, named for some marsupial, was full and roaring.

Inside, the crowd lumped Aya and I together as mutual friends of Alex - only to find we were yet as virgins to his rapacious use of youtube videos, which were his first order of business, and second, and third, indefinitely postponing introductions and matters of the day. I took drink orders to offer a round to the harassed crowd, but the smarter ones denied, certain they wanted something specific only the barman could know. Aya and I crept away from the faces lit up by the latest Saturday Night Live video gleaming from Alex’s hands.

At the bar, Aya turned towards me to say, exasperated, “Is that him? That smell?”

Paris has a distinct smell of urine in its metros and occasionally above, probably from being steeped in the stuff for thousands of years before civilization caught up with bathroom technologies. Alex, however, had a smell more like burning coal, or melting rubber.

Between all his primping, behind what I considered

his pretension, which he called his “polish,” there was the problem of his smell. He’d admitted it as a flaw, which was astounding. This seemed more an attempt to slide the smell under a veneer of self-satisfaction than an actual admission. He claimed it was a side effect of the overactive metabolism that kept him “hot” - aspiration on the “h.”

That night I took up smoking just to spare others the smell. I taught Aya how to hold a cigarette we’d bummed as we tucked into each other’s conversation outside, safe from the acrid smell of Alex. The ties that bind. She revealed she had something planned to shut Alex up for us all, and to stop the incessant videos.

Inside, we opened up to the indistinct interactions encouraged by alcohol. Aya revealed she knew every line of “Rocky Horror” by heart. I shared the story of Mr. Craig to any who would hear me, expanding on the Leonard Cohen quality he took on in our classrooms. The sad romantic. How certain I was he lived in New York as a young man and kept a harem of beautiful women at arm’s length his whole life, until one day he saw his arm was withered and the women had gone and he was just singing sad songs to high school students. All things I’d discussed at length, bubbled and frothed over, long before, back home - but people here found the rich imagining quite impressive for something on the spot. We drank toasts to him, this ragged romantic hiding away before his death as a forgotten man in a Paris metro.

We heard impressions and barked at each other about technology and politics; we raised a drink to the live singer, whose strong forearms and tattoos of musical notes enticed us all and loomed over us throughout the night as he winked and glinted.

“Somebody sleep with him for me - Aya?” I asked, to laughter - and its ripples and recourse throughout the night. As drinks were poured and laughter became more forceful, we started to shake off Alex’s control. It took him a little longer to reign discussions back to one video, and we’d maneuvered him around the bar table so his back was to the wall. He held out his phone, glowing with a gay-rights

blogger “who could stand to hit the gym” in Alex’s opinion. But his voice was drowned out by the bar’s din, and his eyes dimmed as we moved freely away from him unfazed.

As hospitality was extended across tables to strangers-made-temporary-friends he began to orbit us, passing from group to group with less and less to say. I had talked at length with Aya that night about hypothetical revenge-plots on Alex, as we practiced our cigarettes and just how to ask for a light in French.

Inside Alex made weaker and weaker attempts to integrate, and Aya and I eloped outside at every opportunity for a drunken cigarette providing absolution. Alex wouldn’t touch the stuff, and he had a video of a desiccated lung to explain why. Showing this video to our table despite the cries of rejection gave Aya a devilish look in her eye, and she moved away from me with a look full of revenge.

The last I recall of Alex that night was when a hundred American and English throats opened in a loud chorus to Aux Champs-Élysées, a French song everyone in the bar seemed to know the lyrics to. The live music’s forearms holding his guitar twitched with muscle as the crowd went absolutely mad with bliss singing about the Champs-Élysées, the street no one liked or could afford to walk on - a monumental part of Paris countless metro stops away.

Between Aya leaving me to enact her plans, the cigarette smoke, and the spilled Guinness and vodka stingers around me, Alex and his smell were ultimately drowned out. I held a cigarette I’d grown sick of smoking in my hand after the drinking song had petered out, thinking I was holding it for Mr. Craig, who’d come at any moment to sing to me and the boy back home about women, cigarettes, and Biblical references in rasps and gasps.

As I walked back in I met a French man of much stronger jaw than most at the door. I saw Aya over his considerable mass of shoulder, and at the threshold of the bar we both turned to look at her. Aya’s eyes were bright and she gave a pleased nod and a thumbs-up, at which point the Frenchman punched me squarely in the side of the face.

As I held a hand against the numbness which blos-

somed into pain I only heard Aya crying out “Not that one!”

The strong jawed Gaul caught me as I leaned against the door. He herded me to a table to sit as I realized which “one” was in Aya’s assassination request.

I tried for levity, and told Aya I was proud she could employ fit Parisians in hate crimes, only suggesting that Aya, in briefing her bounty hunter, could have given Alex any other moniker than “that awful gay one.” The notion that I fit the description well enough for Etienne, the strong-jawed Gaul of lore and our night’s entertainment with the tattooed forearms, gave me grief, but I kept silent on the issue. A cold beer glass was rammed apologetically against my face.

Etienne the Parisian hulk and the barman said I was a good sport, since usually Americans were the ones to escalate, and asked if there was anything I needed or wanted to know, and my only question was the time.

By the time I’d recovered and everyone had had their laugh about the whole thing the metro had closed. Walking home, we all entertained the idea of getting a cab, until each of arrived at our doors, regretting not getting a cab. Aya and I lived closer to each other than we expected, on either side of Pere Lachaise cemetery, and we managed to walk all the way home, parting at the Voltaire roundabout with a hug, a bise, and a promise on her part to call me the next day. I walked the rest of the way home alone, up the hill to the cemetery, very cold and oddly giddy in a way that felt unnatural and a little perverse.

## DaywithAya

Aya was nice enough to follow through and called me the next morning. She agreed to help me look around that Saturday for the mysterious guitar-man I’d spent the night talking about. We met at Voltaire and walked a little and ate nameless pastries of no particular value. We went down to metro Charonne and up and down line 9 seeking official-looking employees. I made Aya ask the two or three questions that seemed relevant, and with what I could

interpret we almost made a frenchman between us. The search, however, turned up little.

The day was long, traipsing up and down the foxholes through the city of light's dimmest lower reaches. We crisscrossed the city skirting past the wine cellars and the deeper graves – the old bottles and bones alike must rattle when the cars pass by. At some point Aya and I sat smirking on line 3 as the absurdities racked up on us. The day oozed with metro oddness. When we were particularly tired of running back and forth, and we'd exhausted any conversation we had about the night before, I took to staring at my own half-face reflected in the window again. I glanced into the cars and across the stations as we rolled and stopped and rolled and stopped. An old woman, shaking, her cane in one hand and a bouquet of flowers held gingerly upside down in the other sat in the car beside ours, and I must have been staring because she looked through the glass at me worriedly. But just as our cars took off in opposite directions I thought I saw her wink.

Aya was kind enough to collaborate with me on the sheer weirdness of our day as I revisited the topic nearly every hour –

“Am I having a stroke?”

To which she'd neatly reply

“Did I eat bad shrimp?”

There was the little girl, sitting alone with eyes looking straight at me through the glass. French deference and deterrence were not in those eyes, and her earmuffs had puffballs the size of her head and looked ready to transform into yapping Pomeranians at any moment. I saw her just before a metro musician stepped into our cart, delivered to us like manna from heaven. Aya is poised to ask our host of questions but he's strumming his guitar and mouthing “Let It Be” or something similarly Lennonist. He knew the syllables, clearly, but didn't seem to understand English. Aya tried to get his attention but his eyes were closed and his voice bombed, so she sat down giggling beside me to wait it out. He moved straight to French songs next without even a pause to shake his cup. He started to play *la valse a mille*

temps “the waltz in thousand time,” which fell slow and sweetly as we pulled out of Metro Parmentier – its interior covered in potato trellises. Aya was poised to pounce, but the song was slightly more involved than one or two metro stops.

I swear the man wouldn't or couldn't stop singing, and his song picked up like a rabid dog halfway through. The scenes spilled past us in stops and starts on each platform in old arthouse flamboyance. There was a man kneeling with a ring in his hand to propose in metro Republique, which stinks of urine more than most, and not an eye on him but mine, not even the woman he so solemnly proposed to. She was busying herself with a newspaper. We passed through the tunnel and slipping by the usual sexual metro ads, male frontal nudity to advertise watches and women's breasts bared to get you interested in nearby water parks. The man and his music and his silly smiling face were at their most Fellini-esque as we pulled into a station full of spilled white confetti – the metro ads were being scraped and some gush of air or scraper's folly had sent the shreds of paper everywhere. His song struck Amarcord against the subterranean flurry. He was still playing somehow, and Aya and I slumped together in the car. I saw the advertisements flip by, watch after handsome, rugged, glistening watch, like an erotic flipbook, and the man, sweating now over his guitar as he ravaged the strings for the waltz in thousand time brought the imaginary orgy to full fruition in my mind.

Then he stopped and shook his cup, and Aya asked him, and he knew nothing.

“Want to go to the Louvre? It's like two stops from here,” Aya said, her tone in tune with my own exhaustion.

I liked the idea. “Well, I'm game, but I have a question for you.”

“What?” Aya asked, poor girl.

“Are you properly louvricated?”

“Oh god. No. Just. Don't ever talk, ever again. People who say that should be sterilized.”

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Line 1 deposited us directly in the Louvre's subterranean annex, the Carrousel shopping mall, whose cream marble interiors and inverted glass pyramid lent Louvre-level sanctity to the Mariage Frères and Swatch Stores and the glittering Apple with its edenic absent bite.

We passed into the richelieu wing in the Louvre's remodeled foundations, wandering from masterpiece to masterpiece.

"I feel ugly at the Louvre," I said.

"Really? I always feel more talented after looking at stuff like this."

"It's not the art - it's the art students. Look at them." I pointed to a gaggle of them cloistered around a sculpture, splayed exquisitely about, sketching and glittering with well-manicured bohemian flare.

I added, "If you're an artist you should be ugly."

Aya either laughed or sighed.

"Anyway, the boy back home likes pretty artist types. Or, some idea of a pretty artist type. Meanwhile I don't know what I like about him."

Aya, who until then had laughed and sighed and cooed in ways I always found agreeable to me, stopped.

"Okay, hold up. You can't expect me to let you go on like this right? Look. We all hate on stuff we shouldn't. I hate Paris, because I have to leave it. It's terrible to be far away from home. It's hard to keep loving people when one is here and the other is somewhere else. And god knows, I thought I could come to Paris and get away, but at the same time - it's comforting. Because now you know what you want... and should the boy back home ruin the fucking Louvre for you? If you're going to complain, be like everyone else and complain about tourists wanting to see art. If he were right here, or Alex was right here - then they're right there and you have to deal with them - but when they're not they're..."

She sort of floundered and stopped. She pointed ahead of us.

"In Paris there's too much time to think. I thought I could get away, but all the time I'm just having these absurd things happen, like I'll turn the corner, and see the

Hammurabi Stele, and you know what I think? The only thing I think? I should have told that person I loved them. Like, what the fuck is wrong with us."

I looked at Aya, with her exasperation and her passion, like she was suddenly sacrosanct. I didn't like her confiding in me without a cigarette in hand, but in front of us was in fact the Hammurabi Stele she had been pointing to, and I couldn't find anything to say to her.

"Do you want to know why Oscar Wilde thinks America is such a violent country?"

Aya shook her head, off guard, and eased her tensed shoulders, saying,

"Our vice president shot a guy that one time."

I laughed and looked towards the art students and up at the windows to the street that illuminated the deep hall.

"Because our wallpaper's so ugly. We've got ugly things to look at and it's doing ugly things to us. I guess we should focus on beautiful things, and things that are in front of us." I waved like a dizzy romantic heroine at the gaggle of art students, and to my surprise one of them, with a toss of her hair, waved back as if it was ordinary.

Aya laughed out her nose. "So is the boy back home beautiful? Or should I leave you with her?"

"Uhh," I said eloquently as the girl returned to her sketching. "Well I think he's beautiful. Terrible teeth, though - yellow. But god how he talks."

"I'm guessing he talks like you? Incidentally, why do you talk like you?"

"I mean, I'm just doing my best imitation of him really - or maybe not. All we're doing in life is imitating people we like, right? I figure underneath the chipping veneer of the makeup there's a person that gets built up over time."

"What?"

"Nothing, I wrote him something like that in a letter a few days ago - I should probably stop sending them."

"You send him letters?"

"Get this - in blue envelopes." I smiled but to Aya this meant little.

"Is that like a Dr. Who thing?" She asked.

“What, no... I mean... is it?”

“I think so, but I stopped watching Dr. Who.”

“You stopped watching Dr. Who? I’ve never started it. But I’ve never heard of anyone who started - stopping. They turn into sputtering fanatics.”

“Exactly, I couldn’t keep going with it.”

“I knew I liked you - apostate from Dr. Who - that takes a staunch character. I don’t think I’d be that strong.”

“So you write him letters in blue envelopes?”

“Yeah. I sort of want to find Mr. Craig because he was his favorite teacher - substitute teacher.”

“You said he played music?”

“Yeah, only two songs, and god he was so bad at it, I mean, not bad, but it was always so -so weird. Kisses Sweeter than Wine I can’t... I can’t do it but. It was really raspy and low.”

“Why did he like his singing so much?”

“God I don’t know, really. Something just - clicked - there, that I never really understood but I went along with it because he was brilliant and if he saw something in Mr. Craig there must have been something there. He could always find the most incredible poetic meaning in things - big romantic digressions - it always blew me away.”

“Are you going to woo him with the story when you get back?”

“I don’t - I don’t think that’ll work.” I said. Aya raised an eyebrow, and then when I didn’t continue raised it again and again, and so I began.

“He’s got - he’s less interested in that stuff - I guess. He’s saying it’s not like he expected - that since he came out ‘we’ve lost our secret rendezvous.’ It wouldn’t work out.”

Aya drove her damn charm straight through her raised eyebrow and I crumbled like shortbread.

“Ugh - he’s really vain now, is all, since he came out,” I said. Statuary was all around us, and we moved without real direction. “He’s obsessed with stuff he can’t have. He did the whole repressed protestant schtick for a while, still isn’t out to his parents. I sort of want to tell him the Mr. Craig story.”

## Night at St-Vincent-de-Paul

Aya was hanging tight on my arm and dragging me down, so I swung her a bit up the stairs into the train station where we had come in hot pursuit of elbow-patched jackets and a be-quoted guitar.

“I just saw him!” She no-less-than-screamed, and I knew she had because I saw him too, but we both had different ideas exactly where and our arms were still linked. She pulled her way, I pulled mine - a short strain then a sudden heave in my direction as girth and height and sheer mass made me the winner.

“Wait!” She cried out. But I never turned - the grey head was fast dissolving into the crowd.

I stopped - there he was, there he was again. Grey hair everywhere became his, I saw his lobster eyes in little girls’ faces, in the barista’s I passed. I saw guitars that were only cardboard cutouts. I wanted him to be somewhere, so I saw him in that man’s jacket and in this man’s bald head. He was bald wasn’t he? Aya and I stumbled out into the cool air, shoulders hunched, saying “Pardon” as we weaseled through the crowd.

“That was totally him.”

“So I’m not crazy?” I asked.

“No. I am absolutely justifying your craziness right now. We totally had him.”

“Well, he must have been leaving here, he wasn’t heading towards the platforms.”

The front of the train station was a sight that had a bustle to it that felt very unparisian. These crowds were less fashionable and aloof and considerably louder than any part of Paris I knew outside Les-Halles at rush hour.

One of my hallucinations waddles off and I followed it aimlessly. I could tell even at this distance that the elbow patches, the grey air, and the large sack were suspended on a frame too thick to be Mr. Craig’s, and the pace was too serene, more of a glide than a step. But I followed, and Aya held close to me reminding me I wasn’t crazy.

“Fuck I wish I got a video we could have evidence. Well I’m fucking shivering.”



We walked into a tangle of streets without enough street lamps for my taste, and the tangle of it all would have been romantic if I hadn't just missed my prize. I'd followed the latest grey illusion into an alley and wondered if I should fear being followed or if the poor person I was following feared being followed. Well, they'd have had every right to be. I wouldn't want to run into myself at a party let alone in a dark alley.

"Seriously, see me shiver?." She held out her hand to show the shake.

"With antici—"

Aya slapped me, in a way that hurt a little, and looked around.

"I don't know where the fuck we are."

Of course, neither did I. It had stairs which was always unsettling to see in a city I called the city of the plain for its flatness.

"Gare de l'Est and Gare du Nord are right around the corner from each other. Or they're one metro stop apart — you can't get lost between metro stops. It's impossible." I said, and turning the corner a cathedral lept up in front of us, with two tall towers framing it, and a huge embarcadero of steps in front reaching out for us. Aya and I didn't have much to say, but there was no reason to fall silent like we did. There were more beautiful cathedrals on our morning commute, but this one surprised us, and it stood over us looking pleased at this surprise.

"Look, what are they doing?" Aya said, pointing ahead.

Young men were throwing a ball against the steps of the Cathedral, leaping and crashing against each other to catch it and send it flying back at the face of the house of god. A small group, no more than four, were smoking on some of the lower steps as the ball whizzed and crashed, and the boys leapfrogged and rolled about on themselves. Aya observed in me a noticeable exasperation, and possibly an open mouth and faint drooling.

"Lambourghini mercy... you bitch are so thirsty..." she began, but I walked up the steps of the cathedral without another word except pardon as I passed the little, lovely

coven, following the silhouette of that idea-of-a-grey-coat-and-guitar as it vanished behind the door.

The lights in the ground glared and obscured my sight as I stepped over them, and as the darkness returned I observed that same glow illumine the great pillars and the doors, whose wooden entrance felt like a toll booth.

I walked through the doors, the first light, the second very heavy, into the cathedral St-Vincent-de-Paul. The light inside was nothing like "false twilight" of the Gothic cathedrals. The stone wasn't grey, and no part of the building felt old or weary or strained. The style was classical and harmonious. The light was golden and even, and felt like I was stepping into the splendor of some Ptolemy's tomb. Although I'd followed fast on the footsteps of that shade of an idea I entered into a space empty of humans on all sides, and only the distant sound of humming and coughing.

I'd made it halfway up the aisle, looking nowhere in particular before Aya caught me by the hand and pulled me around.

"Isn't that it?"

Only from the corner of my eyes could I see a guitar disappear behind a door from a chapel somewhere to the side of the Cathedral. Ahead I saw, in the rounded end of the Cathedral hidden just behind the altar, a communion of eleven or twelve old French men and women patting each other on the back.

Aya tugged at my ear like a nun, and at a soft gallop we came to the door. I looked at her a moment, she slapped me again.

I opened the door and slipped inside, to find the equivalent of a spacious closet.

"Shit — shit — Aya it's a confession booth!"

She had already closed the door on me, undoubtedly standing watch in case authorities would come and force us to make a cinema-ready escape.

I'd never been in a confession booth, having never had the talent to be catholic, and the claustrophobia of the whole thing and the uncomfortable wooden chair didn't—

« Tu es pas le père. » "You are not the father." came

whispered, sweetly and clearly through the mesh window in the wall.

« Pardon ! » I cried, like an infant.

“You’re just a young man.”

“Shit Aya, it’s the wrong side!” I attempted to press the door, and stop my throat from erupting in technicolor groans of vomit and shame, but now Aya seemed intent on locking me in.

“Did you follow me?” came through the screen, free of any tone of condemnation.

“No, pardon, pardon, I’m sorry I think I’m-”

I thought I heard ringing in my ears, but given the locale it could just as well have been bells. I babbled a few nasal explosions which bubbled and popped into something that seemed to connect to the woman as French.

“I’m sorry I’ve been looking for someone, I thought he was on the other side of the screen.”

“No, lui c’est moi, he’s me, who you followed.”

“I’m... sorry. Do you, have a guitar? D-did you have a guitar?” I hardly knew what language we were speaking in the rush of it all.

“Yes. I play the music for the church.” She seemed so free in her speech, and she spoke so clearly I could make out every word like she was the very voice of my high school french teacher in her enunciation.

“Bonne Soiree, jeune homme, j’espere que tu trouveras I hope you find...”

Aya finally de-butressed herself from the door, and I swung out.

We ran out of the church, Aya echoing my notes of terror with laughter at my expense. Outside Aya asked the boys at play where we were and I stood mute to translate to her what she couldn’t figure out. We wobbled towards home.

“It’s better than a punch to the face, right?” She said.

“Yes, but I’d like to blame you for both of these nights because you didn’t have to barricade me in?”

“I was just leaning against the door to look casual.”

“Well, besides mucking up some poor woman’s relationship with god we got nothing today.”

“I’ve enjoyed it.”

“Riding around on metros?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“Me too.” I said, exhaling. It was a wonder how small the city seemed - with Cathedrals and monuments piled up on themselves at every corner, everything within walking distance.

“It’s the most I’ve ever ridden them. Remember what our teacher said the first day when she was teaching us about the transportation?”

“Hmm, not really” Aya said.

“That if you have to change metro lines more than once to get there it’s not worth it.”

“Well, it’s one way to figure out what’s worth doing in Paris.” Aya said, and we crossed arms again, and in my pocket my cheap by-the-month phone was ringing. The one person with my number had news for me. I let it buzz and quiet down, and later the voicemail told me, in Alex’s shrill voice, that he’d met someone who knew all about the metro singers - and that I would be meeting him the next day, without exception.

## Day with Alex

Alex and I took four metro lines before finally getting to Abesses station, the whole while chatting about everything he enjoyed because he wouldn’t tell me anything about his message from the night before until we got to Montmartre.

“God why do you have to be so pretentious? Just get with the glingo already.”

“I’m sorry, the glingo?”

“Gay lingo? First lesson – gay lingo – Oh! Baby’s first word.”

“Oh god” my usual response. Alex was flicking through a line of stills on his phone, each a gate to some new sparkling boy with a blog poised to patent a homo-mot-du-jour.

“It’s part of your culture, get with the times.” He said.

“Can’t I be second generation gay and grow up speaking English and resent my parent’s stupid culture?”

“Honey, honey, that’s not how it works. Didn’t you get your gay man kit when you came out? Here, here, watch this.”

The latest variety of muscled, smiling blogger was spelling it out for me from Alex’s hand. Alex let his other hand triumphantly sweep the sculpture of his motionless hair.

“Throwing shade?” The term aligned vaguely with a folksy song I’d heard from one of the countless indie darlings with three names “James Allen Leftwich” or some such nonsense.

“Oh I love throwing shade – you need to know that – it’s casually insulting people in a way they don’t understand. Seriously, how can you even function knowing that little?”

“By the grace of God I think I’m going to be okay.”

We’d finally gotten off on the Abesses platform. I tried my best to outpace him with overlong steps but he relished it, the race. The Parisiens and tourist alike pooled around the doors of huge industrial looking elevators. I bounded past pursued by

“Bear, Otter, Twink, you know those right? Etiennes a total Bear – woof, you know woof?”

The Abesses stairs are a tight corkscrew with a harsh echo. Turning and turning in that narrowing tube – all I could hear was Alex’s ringing, singing, stinging voice against a dull roar of spent French echoes.

“Snatchpatch kids, Molly, Santorum, and Reading, Gaga, woof, dust, himbo, dick pig, that’s fabulous, chaser leather, sass kitten, and gaybros” Echo on echo, image on image, wheel within a wheel like the circles that you find in the windmills of your mind.

It never ends, the Abesses staircase, it lasts precisely as long as it needs to break your spirit and winds a little longer round its spool. Even once the Catherine Wheel is done with there are three or four more shallow flights of stairs to bound up until you reach the open air.

I’d skimmed through the crowds of Abesses like I was gliding on ice – I brandished my “pardon” proudly as I shimmied against the stream of descending passengers with salmonlike tenacity.

“Where are you going?”

I turned around to see Alex jump into the tattooed arms of none other than Etienne, and their embrace, which started as a bise and turned distressingly tonguey half-way through left me baffled.

I elegantly intoned an “uhh” until they’d finished the requisite licking and smiling and Alex announced to me, proudly,

“This is Etienne, I gave him my number the other night at the bar—”

“We met actually - I - I didn’t - I don’t - Hi.” I managed.

“So I was thinking Etienne could talk to you about your guitarman in the metro. He’s done singing on the metro too.”

“Oh yeah it was - it was cool” Etienne began “sorry, again for uh - the other night.”

“It’s a story, right?” I said, “What do you know about singing in the metro - is there a list - do you have to sign up?”

“Yeah man, I had a spot in Republique by the fruit stand down there. You have to rehearse and everything and I only got in with my whole band - you’ll meet them actually.”

“Well I don’t think that’s necessary but do you know if I can find a rehearsal list—”

“What do you mean not necessary - we’re going to a party.” Alex said, with a punch at my side.

“A party?” I asked.

“Yeah, your singer-songwriter fetish is just a sidestory tonight.”

I blinked at Alex as I remembered Aya had, and turned back to Etienne.

“So what lines do you work when you’re a metro musician?”

“Oh you don’t - you just work one spot in a station - the ones who walk around are usually just homeless people singing for tips. They don’t get licensed like the ones in the stations.”

I thought I felt something snap inside of me, as Alex

squeezed on Etienne's muscular forearm, and my time receded from me. I'd been dragged up to Montmartre to go with Alex against my will, and I would go against my will, because the will was weak.

I followed them in a haze, and saw Etienne's apartment and his band members, all just as lovely and loud. I learned Etienne had the notes to "Blue Moon" tattooed on his arm, which meant nothing to me. I told the bandmates about Mr. Craig's appearance and they admitted they didn't know who went where on what metros. All I could think was finding him so that I wouldn't go home empty handed, and it seemed nothing else would follow me home from Paris.

## Metro Dreams

It was an adventure much could be made of, a walk back down the Abesses staircases. Standing at the platform of line 2 which rang with late night lamentations - "We're not going home yet are we?" and "Does anyone know a place?"

Alex' voice rang more in harmony on that descent than I'd ever heard it, to the beautiful men and to Etienne who fiddled with a rattling set of keys like they were some loose tambourine. Nothing made noise of that kind in the metro acceptable, not night, not wine, not love, not anything. I would expect to die more quietly, and to make less of a scene.

They talked about going to a big club, somewhere on the Champs-Elysees, someplace I'd never dreamed of. But then, line 2 had two directions, at one l'Etoile, the Champs and the overpriced grandeur of West Paris, and towards the other Pere Lachaise, my stop, my home, my warm bed.

There was still a metro yet in either direction ripe, enticing us with opposite evenings in their possibility. Every one trying to convince every other to go to the Champs because it was absurd. The train came as if waiting for us, and we were on the side to go to the Champs the entire time. Etienne and Alex and the rest all stepped on. I did too, and through the glass where I expected a familiar

half-reflection as the night's last comfort I saw elbow patches, and a luminous guitar, and thought I heard it singing, and effortlessly I stepped backwards off the train, as easy as falling.

Line 2 roared and Alex and Etienne and the whole gaggle were penned up behind the door with incredulous looks, and hands only just retracted before the teal doors came crashing down and they vanished stage right down the tunnel towards the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs-Elysees, and the flashing progression of clubs and frenzied dancing they had planned for. It would end with them variously entangled, no doubt, in the web of the night's pleasures and without a penny to their name once the bouncers and the barmen were done extorting what they could after providing the night's pleasures.

The train thus burrowed into the dark cave to my right, I was left with the cho of distancing steps - like rainfall - and the damp trench of stones and mice and old Parisian tobacco phlegm where the train would pass. I saw him, and his guitar, moving coolly up the stairs, and I resolved myself and followed him up my side to the platform above that canal where the trains ran. I moved quickly to catch up to him as he moved to ascend again towards higher stairs and my throat broke with the French syllables just as he near departed the dim metro hall to the well lighted turnstiles and colorful maps. The echo struck him and he turned back to me, and I was alone with him in the metro, and his eyes were clearly on me there down the steps before the unfinished walls.

I wished I could simply vanish. I wished Alex had been next to me to make me insignificant. I stepped back from the sight of his unfamiliar face and the rosewood guitar which had called to me and betrayed me.

"What was that, young man?" He asked, and came down the steps.

"Wh-what is your name?" I said, in fullest, polite french.

"Uhh, I'm Jacque, what is it?" he said, and he was there with me above the trench of the metro.

I felt my breath vanishing and my voice receding, but

he walked up closer to me, to see me under flickering lights.

“I thought you were dead.”

His dark eyes narrowed in a disgust that cooled into something like pity.

“It’s the metro, not the underworld. I am alive, quite alive, young man.”

“It’s just - your guitar is - I know the man who used to own your guitar.”

“Used to own?” He said, with deep confusion, touching the rosewood instrument and removing its strap from its shoulder.

“An old friend, who used to sing to me. He is dead now”

He gently touched the bristle of his beard and inquisitively ran his tongue between his lips.

“I’m sorry, I wouldn’t know. I’ve had this guitar too long. Uh, you’re button’s undone.”

He pointed squarely at my chest, where my coat flap hung open.

“I lost the button in Pere Lachaise.” I replied, tensing at my every crease.

“The cemetery? Oh la la, what would a boy be doing there? Do you use the map?” He made an indistinct gesture I couldn’t really place.

“Looking at graves - it’s my favorite park in Paris. I live nearby.” Telling him where I lived came easily - and I couldn’t believe I’d given him even a hint of where he could find me.

“Without your coat? In Pere Lachaise - there is a reputation you know - it is on the map, that graveyard.” He leered at my coat’s flap and the limp string where the button had fallen off.

He began again - “You know, I saw a photo shoot going on in that cemetery once - it was preposterous - women laying topless on the graves - the mud on their thighs.”

“I didn’t see that. I didn’t know I lost the button until I left. I was visiting the graves.”

“Misplaced your coat in the graveyard for a while? Tsk tsk tsk” His tongue as it clicked darted in and out of his mouth with yellow teeth peaking at me, lovely with

nicotine. His finger twirled at the vanished button’s torn thread.

“I bet it was Oscar Wilde’s grave where you took it off. Laid it down in a bush somewhere, just for a moment.”

“I told you. I was visiting graves.” The metro sign blinked, 10 minutes to next train, perhaps the last, in the unforgiving emptiness of line 2.

“You come up and talk to me, a man, in the metro, a button undone - Americans wear black coats to look Parisien. You ask me what my name is, and tell me stories about Pere Lachaise. What do you want in that silly ruined coat? What is your name, young man?”

“Sebastian” I said, without a breath.

“You’re a type Sebastian.” He said. “There have been two - no - three Sebastians in my life. My father was Sebastian, and Sebastian was... oh there was one who was an engineering student. Always stressed. With him I always helped to relieve stress. He did not know how to live, really. I taught him to taste wine - he drank it like water before. How to sip wine and to spit.” His mouth unhelpfully mimed the muscular action of slurping and spitting wine.

I felt a general soreness through me. He continued,

“He still visits me in the city, sometimes. We have dinner like gentlemen at my house by the Champs-Elysees. There is still a night left for dinner for gentlemen.”

I’d nearly prepared my exit-strategy when he stopped his story - so I settled on a look of dull uninterest.

“That’s nice.” I said.

“He was not American though, he was Dutch, tall like you - big boy. Me, I like them big and young, you see. What’s your preference?”

“Plants. Books. I do not have a preference. I don’t prefer. I like gardens.”

“Yes. Pere Lachaise, you said.”

“Pere Lachaise and the Tuileries.”

“Tuileries. Interesting choice.”

“Oh?” I said, holding my look of boredom best I could.

“Yes it’s not what I would say - it’s the King’s palace, and his garden where he kept his young boys - his concu-

bines.”

“In America we don’t talk like this anymore. We don’t pick up people in metro tunnels.” My voice had cracked and I shivered at my own weakness.

“Oh, you’re friendly in America, even to strangers. But you can’t look down on me, you don’t have wine.”

“We have wine,” I said, with Alex’s tone as best I could remember it, and I thought I felt a rising plume of air, a forbearance of a coming train - but on the platform I couldn’t tell from which direction. He spoke and spoke, and I felt my head swim.

“You spoke to me, young man.

“Have you read Baldwin? Americans can have - experience - in Paris, in the old sense. You want an experience? A story to tell back home?”

I held the silence. The metro announcements toned, but no words followed. The sign with its looming, uncertain dashes, flickered, and spelled 2 minutes to the next train. I heard a distant sound building, like a shout in the street, or water running down a drain to meet the sea. I had a story now, one that would fill me with a delicious, old kind of shame, as the boy back home would say. I had his hand on my button’s string, I had the taste in the air like transgression.

We still stood on the higher platform when the train arrived, roaring, its hour come round at last. I would let it take me anywhere, I decided, to spare a taxi ride, or the long walks up above. We descended to the platform, and I crossed into the car.

I sat to face my own half-reflection, resigned to the last metro of line 2. I almost kicked a cup resting at the foot of a seat but I saw it was full of either flat beer or urine. Jacques decided to lean against a grab handle, and began to ease and flex the strings of the guitar.

“A song? Young man?”

“Do you know Molly Malone?” I asked, squarely.

“That song is about Dublin, not Paris.”

“They play it everywhere. What about Kisses Sweeter than Wine?”

“I don’t know of anything like that.”

I remembered where I was, and thought it was the oddest thing in the world, to have a metro musician play a song I wanted to hear, on a train that knew where I was and where I was going. I could look back over the city in which I loved you, Paris, where nothing new ever catches on, and

“Aux Champs Elysees. I know the lyrics,” I said, and he laughed with a glance at the lit metro map as the car began to move, and he began to play. Beside my foot the cup’s contents began to tremble, bringing up that familiar, pleasing fragrance. The name of Paris like perfume poured out under a ceramic sky. No wonder the young love you!