

Sacred Heart

MONTMARTRE

It's hard to be spontaneous—at least I've always thought so. The more you try, the less extemporaneous you really are, and the less you try—well, nothing really happens then. It's a lose-lose, at least that's what I've found to be the case.

Once, perhaps, I've been spontaneous. It may have been when I walked alongside a girl in a foreign city, more strange to her than to me, where we had split off from our friends to wander on our own. We had no particular direction as we walked those streets bathed in light.

If there was anything we followed, it was the aroma of freshly-baked baguettes wafting along the avenue. We ambled past the people of the town standing in the doorways of boutiques and bars, chatting in their nasally tongue. They kept the streets loud and alive, as if energized by the history and longevity that had long been stored in the city's deep foundations.

Though the air was cool, we felt warmed by the glow of incandescent lights, for in the City of Lights the street lamps painted everything as beautiful—and as we drifted down the cobblestone river, we basked in their warmth. Their golden hue reflected from her hair of the same shade, creating an illusory halo.

“Lauren, I have an idea.” With my hands in my pockets I explained to her my plan for a perfected evening. It involved a specific site I had been to a number of years ago, a place I urged us to find in the city that very night.

She smiled, “Sounds fun.”

ARLINGTON, TX

Brightly painted rollercoasters raced all around; hulking metal screeched and children screamed for their parents to carry them. Straining to be heard over the cacophony, the theme park’s speakers played the early Beatles’ track “I’ve Just Seen a Face.”

...Had it been another day / I might have looked the other way. / And I’d have never been aware / But as it is I’ll dream of her / Tonight...

The Mop Tops strummed cheerily on their acoustic guitars while greasy crowds swarmed, turkey legs and funnel cakes in hand. Adults held the hands of children, couples did likewise, and noise and laughter ricocheted throughout the park. But five teenagers at a picnic table, two boys and three girls, were too distracted by their hormones and cheese fries to notice.

“See, I don’t get why people like WALL-E. I thought it was kinda boring,” said a boy with blond, popstar-esque hair, having to speak loudly to be heard over the music. He was a football player with thick arms and was never one for the arts. “Nothing really happens, and no one says anything.”

“Not at all—there’s so much going on in that movie,” the other boy replied to his friend. This boy was gangly with modest brown hair and was the sort of boy who liked to brag about his excursions to Europe and vast knowledge of Pixar. “It just doesn’t involve dialogue.”

“Like what?” asked the girl who was sitting across from him. She was blond and the sort of girl who didn’t normally seek out verbal sparring, but since she was meeting these boys for the first time, she made an exception. “What’s ‘going on’ in the movie?”

“Well the movie makes you care—you care about WALL-E and EVE, don’t you? The movie makes you care about them and what they’re trying to do by characterizing them with sounds and body language.” His hands flailed as he explained, “In fact, the team that worked on the film watched every Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton movie in preparation, and they saw how those two actors were able to tell their stories purely through visual efforts. In the same way, WALL-E and EVE communicate everything they need to without words—they do it with movement.”

The girl considered this. Then she spoke slowly, “What’s so important about movement?”

The boy paused to think, and his hands calmed.

“You make it sound like we should be watching silent movies,” the football player interjected as if stating absurdity.

One of the other girls looked up from her phone, “And why are we talking about this?”

The topic of movies was immediately put away and replaced in turn with discussion of school and standardized testing. Everyone gave their opinions, but the brown haired boy’s involvement was more mild. He instead stole glances of the girl with blond hair. He watched her delicate gestures and her shoulders shifting with feline femininity. He watched her brush her gold hair behind her ear, and he caught a full glimpse of her smile. Her blue eyes glimmered. What’s so important about movement? Beyond both deliberate and graceful, he could not conjure a word to describe each motion.

As one of the girls went on about her ACT score, the gangly boy’s friend leaned over to him. In a hushed tone, the football player whispered, “I’m really into Lauren; I could totally see something happening there.” The Pixar-buff nodded his head, and they both looked at her for a

moment before the blond boy turned to rejoin the conversation. But the other boy continued to gaze for a moment more. Then he too turned to hear how much more difficult the SAT was than the ACT.

MONTMARTRE

In my gut I felt a twinge of excitement. I had similar twinges in the past, typically following a meal, and so I kept my reserve, taking care not to let the excitement have complete run of me. I had a plan for something I thought she would enjoy, something that she might describe as special. I only hoped the long journey to our destination would not strain the suspense.

It was the Boulevard de Rochechouart that we walked along. The street flowed calmly through the north end of the city and carried us with it, past a bakery still open—possibly the one that had guided us all this way—and past building after building that we knew nothing about except that we likely walked through the scene of some Audrey Hepburn movie. We passed houses of artists and politicians, among which was the old, yellow-plastered home of Henri Rochefort, a famous French polemicist. At the time it meant very little to us, but I have since found that it was also the last Parisian studio for Auguste Renoir, whose 1876 oil painting of an outdoor soirée, *Dance at Le moulin de la Galette*, alone would have justified a visit.

Earlier that evening, we had walked the Boulevard de Clichy, home of Moulin Rouge among other infamous locations. Comparatively, Rochechouart was not as exciting—subtler and understated. There were not as many neon lights or flashing signs, mostly people doing whatever they did in the late evening. Passing them, we drifted in our walk, too enchanted by the air we breathed. “This city,” she said.

“This city,” I confirmed.

“It’ll be hard to go home, having seen all this. There’s something special about how people live here—it seems calm, and full.”

I looked at her beside me. “It won’t be so bad.”

We came to a length in our journey where the night-life slowed. There were less bars and cafés, less people out on the street. We talked more then. I tried to convince her that her ability to speak Spanish was essentially the same as fluency in French—but to no avail. She pressed me for the name of our destination; I would not divulge but she did not relent. I gave a hint as to our destination: a church. For a moment disappointment flashed across her face, probably due to the multitude of churches we had seen during our time abroad. I assured her there was more to be had than a steeple at our destination, and her optimism quickly returned. She then clasped her hand around mine. That was all the distraction we needed to pass the time until we arrived at Montmartre, the hill that gives the district its name.

ROSEBUD, AR

They drove just outside that small town they would call home for four more years. He talked a lot, more than he should have, trying for witty and interesting—anything to impress her during that early stage in the romance. She laughed and remarked often, but he continued chatting rapidly, driven by the excitement in his chest.

“The sky sure is pretty tonight; it’s been a while since I’ve seen stars like this.”

She agreed. “The colors of the sky are beautiful, swirly. They remind me of that one painting...”

“Starry Night?”

She craned her neck over the dashboard to look at the night sky. “That’s the one. It’s like the sky has texture, like its been smeared up there in dark shades of blue.”

They came to a stop sign. No traffic for miles. They kept going.

“Did you know that Van Gogh actually considered *Starry Night* a failure?” he asked, regaining his earlier confidence. “In all the letters he wrote about his paintings, he never considered it as something of note.”

She twisted under her seatbelt to face him, “Really? But it’s so beautiful.”

Occasionally abandoning the steering-wheel, his hands moved with exaggerated gestures, “Yeah, even though he always preferred to paint nature, there was something about that night sky. He felt that the stars were too grand to capture—” He made a fist to emphasize his point, “—that he couldn’t do them justice.”

The car fell silent for a moment as it rolled up to an intersection where they could turn to begin the trip back. He chose otherwise and continued straight; she raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything. Keeping one hand on the steering-wheel, he turned on the radio. The sound of a folk-rock band floated into the car.

...When you love somebody / it’s hard to think about / anything but to breathe / When you love somebody / and bite your tongue all you get / is a mouthful of blood...

The beat of the song was fast and vivacious, warming the car more than the heater could. She inched over in her seat, right up against the armrest and leaned gently on the driver, her shoulder resting on his. Independent of the music’s tempo, she breathed slowly with deep, transcendent breaths. She only remained there a minute before adjusting back into her seat.

“Hey Lauren, I’m really glad we got to hang out tonight.”

“Me too.” She smiled and looked back out the window and at the twisting sky. He looked at her when he could afford to steal glances away from his circuit. He noticed her daisy skin hidden by flaxen hair. He could smell her floral sent, roses perhaps. And if he was feeling dangerous and willing to look away from the road for very long, he could make out the corner of her eye, cobalt with a ring of olive at the center of her iris—a perfect palette for painting the earth.

The song continued filling the car with warmth as they rolled back up to the intersection. He checked both directions before continuing straight through.

MONTMARTRE

We came upon the stairs of the Rue Foyatier, a magnificent spectacle of civil architecture but a beast on the thighs. It would lead us up the hill and to the west side of where we were heading. We began our ascent.

The hill which we climbed, Montmartre, is the highest point in Paris but is perhaps better known for being the main set for the Best Picture winner *An American in Paris*, featuring the lovable Gene Kelly. However, the frequent light posts we passed, emanating their enchanting glow upon us, are not to be confused with the light post on which Gene Kelly swings in *Singin’ In the Rain*—an easy mistake to make.

“I’m not sure what made me think of this place. I came here a long—” I struggled to breathe as we pushed upward, “—a long time ago, the first time I came to Paris, and there was something earlier while we were walking that triggered—” I climbed a few more steps, “—triggered a memory of this church.” I took a few more steps, pushing on my legs with my hands.

“I remembered the massive organ inside and the chorus that sang *a cappella* anyway. They sounded like angels.” I breathed some more.

“Like angels? If we’re lucky, when we reach the church we might even see the Christ-child,” she said, making us both doubt if the trek was worth it.

Pulling ourselves up the stairs, we managed glimpses of our destination. At the top of the hill sat the great white basilica, like a plump cherub awaiting our arrival with a jovial grin and ivory skin. He welcomed us, and we badly wanted to reach him.

We climbed the hill with long strides and fortitude, as if striving for our own laurel wreath. The task was not as hard in our minds as it was taxing on our bodies, because we had something to look forward to at the top. Enthusiasm and love made our feet light and set our faces forward.

In reality, it didn’t take long to reach the top; it came only at the expense of our legs. We stepped forward from the stairs of the Rue Foyatier, around some inconsequential buildings atop the hill, and approached the Basilique du Sacré-Cœur.

FORT WORTH, TX

He drove her through that town they had called home all their lives, along interstates they had both grown complacent with. A sky dismal as Monet’s *Water Lilies* shadowed over them, and a steady drizzle fell. The only light at that time of night was the dingy glow of the city’s street lamps.

She had her body turned outward, watching the water droplets as seen by the outside light. He turned to look at her—beautiful as ever—but he had no words to say; there was no

reaction conjured inside of him, except for perhaps a pinch of guilt. He turned his face back toward the road in front of him.

They had fought about something, over at his house, less than an hour before. It doesn't really matter what it was over—perhaps, he criticized the movie she suggested that night. He thinks he's the next Roger Ebert or something. Fleetwood Mac played on the radio to mask the tension. The song had a gray sort of sound—and voices that seemed to echo out of fog.

...Thunder only happens when it's raining...

She leaned against the car door, looking wistfully out the window—the cool glass surely chilled her skin. He continued to steal glances but never entertained the thought of talking to her. Neither of them did.

The radio whimpered and would occasionally give way to static, probably from the thick night sky. They didn't really listen, though they knew the song.

...When the rain washes you clean, you'll know, you'll know...

She turned to face him, which he saw in his peripheral. He turned to her, and they shared equally glum expressions. With courage and tremendous facial strength, she gave a smile that never reached her eyes. It took effort to do so, and he was aware. He thought about returning it.

They reached the exit to take her to her house. He got off and did not deviate.

MONTMARTRE

In front of us stood the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Paris. Into the night sky towered 272 feet of calcite and stone; it was as beautiful as it was white.

We walked closer to it, admiring its ornateness and the bronze equestrian statues. Still, we had seen the outside of churches before—we wanted to go inside. Searching for the front

entrance to the house of worship, we followed the outermost walls and towers, the first semblances of the church's Romano-Byzantine style.

The structure's mixed architectural form was a loose interpretation if any style at all, and made the viewer feel off-balanced, not really belonging in one era or another. It supposedly was designed as a deliberate reaction to the turmoil that spawned the church. The basilica's commission indirectly originated in the speech of Bishop Fournier in 1870, denouncing France for its "century of moral decline." These harsh words were quickly emphasized the next year by the uprising of the Paris Commune, a radical socialist and revolutionary group, which began atop Montmartre. The Commune was short lived and culminated with the "Bloody Week" which left hundreds—possibly thousands—dead. Immediately after the insurgents were squelched, France was defeated in the Franco-Prussian war, which claimed an additional 58,000 casualties. The people of France who remained felt that they had passed through the flames of one of the most trying times in their history as a nation. They had felt pain, and they had felt hurt.

Hope was restored to them by means of a symbol erected on their highest hill, where it could never be hidden. It was the Basilica of the Sacred Heart—Sacré-Cœur de Jésus-Christ—a symbol for them of the compassion and sympathy of their savior, one who knew their tortured history and cared. That love mended them, and brought them out of their darkness.

It is not an easy thing to be brought out of a low place—it takes more than cranes and pulleys. It takes an embrace, a loving remark, a demonstration of compassion; it takes something beautiful, like a poem or a picture or a song—which is precisely what we were hoping to hear.

We arrived at the elaborate doorway of the church. “I can’t wait for you to hear this. It was the most heavenly sound I’ve ever heard.” I pulled on the large bronze handle. It didn’t budge. I stood back and studied the door, as if some secret key might reveal itself to me.

“Maybe it’s closed for the night. It is pretty late.” I turned around to face her with my lips turned down at the corners. “It’s all right,” she said, “let’s see what else this hill has to offer.”

She took my hand, and we began to walk—this time a little more aimless, a little less constrained. We walked toward the other side of Montmartre, leaving the plump, white church behind us, and finding a cluster of shops and restaurants centered around a lively plaza, we began to explore.

The place is called the Place du Tertre, and it sits only a couple streets away from Sacré-Cœur. It is the pulse of the heart of Montmartre, where art is lived. Musicians played and artists sketched all throughout the square. Even with the moon overhead, people from all around Paris came to lounge in the outdoor cafés and enjoy life. Lauren and I walked around, peering at various paintings and portraits as the classically-trained critics we imagined ourselves to be. I would lean in, adjusting my invisible glasses, “This piece seems to be from the late Baroque period.” With a wry smile, she’d retort, “Hardly, darling, it is clearly Neoclassical.” We imagined what this square would have looked like in years passed, what it would have been like to sip on our own coffee while men like Salvador Dalí, Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, or Vincent van Gogh whipped out a landscape for the few francs it would earn them.

But alas, we had arrived just as the transcendent artists gave way to their tired eyes. They began to gather their brushes and instruments, and we began to explore the edges of the square beyond the gaiety.

By that hour, most of the restaurants and cafés had shut their doors. Most windows were dark and the signs hanging from doors were flipped. Beginning to turn back, we noticed an eatery with its lights still bright. We asked the owner if he was still open, and with a grin he invited us in, flipping the sign on the door as we entered. We ordered one crepe with banana and Nutella, the european treat. We shared a fork and took turns taking bites. The manager turned out the back lights and stacked chairs on tables as we sat in contented silence. After each bite, she looked around the cafe trying to decipher the menus. In the dim lighting, I watched her as we made slow progress on our dessert.

SEARCY, AR

The evening glow of the setting sun—just before it sinks into the earth to rest for the night—poured through the tall living room windows and blanketed the small house in warmth. A corduroy chair sat in front of one window and cast long shadow into the kitchen. The outside scent of shortleaf pine and purple weeds seeped into the house.

He had prepared street tacos for the two of them. Gourmet tacos were a favorite of his to make; they seemed hip and authentic and, most importantly, were easy to cook—just a little dicing and skillet-work.

When they finished eating, he tried to surprise her with an additional treat, a cake he had been baking. He retrieved the chocolate cake with two oven mitts and an apron that said “Grill Master,” and with a knife he served her slice, waiting for the verdict.

She grimaced.

“No good?” He took her plate from her and tried a bite for himself. It had the texture of chalk and the taste of it too.

“It’s the thought that counts,” she said with some teasing in her eyes.

Setting her plate aside, she took his hand and lead them from the kitchen into the living room where they found a spot on the couch. Their arms were tangled around each other, but he managed to free one limb to reach over and start some music on his computer—Jack Johnson’s “Do You Remember,” a sweet, somber sort of song.

They sat quietly on the couch for a moment before she spoke, “I was looking at different ways to hang the lights. You can crisscross them, but I’m not a big fan of that. You can also hang them from the center of the room—like a big top. I think that’d be nice.” He listened to her ideas for the reception even though they were both fully aware of the many months that would pass before then. But ever since that night in Little Rock, up on that bridge, she had spoken of nothing else but ideas for the date.

When her brain could retrieve no other ideas from her Pinterest archives, she closed her eyes and nestled her head into the soft spot between his upper arm and chest. Johnson began to fade at the song’s end,

...years have gone by / We can't rewind / We're locked in time / But you're still mine.

MONTMARTRE

It was late and time to head back down; our friends, elsewhere in the city, would be expecting us soon. On our trajectory back to the stairs of the Rue Foyatier, we spied the levels of vines and garden used for meditation rolling down the hill directly in front of the basilica. We figured a detour was warranted and hoped at the bottom level we might find some stairs that would take us down to the street.

Finding a level not already occupied by lovers, we stood there in the garden, the ivory cherub at our backs. From our vantage point, we could see the entire City of Lights. Though shops were mostly closed, lamps and car headlights still dotted the landscape, and warmth emanated from it. We looked out over Paris, situated on the Seine River in the north of vineyard country. The moon glimmered across the river.

We both leaned on the rail in front of us, and I slid my hand over hers. From where we stood we could see the once home of impressionist Gustave Caillebotte, and at that moment I felt quite like his *Young Man at the Window*, though I did not stand alone. We looked out, but not intently, just enough to take in the yellow glow of the city, the windows glittering, and the cadmium sheen of late traffic in the streets. We saw the circular intersection around the Arc de Triomphe lit up by headlights, a golden ring much like the ones we would share with each other two years later.

We had our fill of urban vista and began our descent again. We ambled down stairs toward the Boulevard de Rochechouart, where the streets still glowed in the night and where life happened. Life is not lived up on hills; it is lived by the rivers, in the valleys. And though we may again return to that hill, to that holy church, we have found our life amongst the traffic, the bakeries, and the street lamps. There we find our joy.