

We'll Always Have Paris, Ray Bradbury

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It was a hot Saturday night in July in Paris, near midnight, when I prepared to head out and walk around the city, my favorite pastime, starting at Notre Dame and ending, sometimes, at the Eiffel Tower.

My wife had gone to bed at nine o'clock and as I stood by the door she said, 'No matter how late, bring back some pizza.'

'One pizza coming up,' I said, and stepped out into the hall.

I walked from the hotel across the river and along to Notre Dame and then stopped in at the Shakespeare Bookstore and headed back along the Boul Miché to stop at Les Deux Magots, the outdoor café where Hemingway, more than a generation ago, had regaled his friends with Pernod, grappa, and Africa.

I sat there for a while watching the Parisians, of which there was a multitude, had myself a Pernod and a beer, and then headed back toward the river.

The street leading away from Les Deux Magots was no more than an alley lined with antiques stores and art galleries.

I walked along, almost alone, and was nearing the Seine when a peculiar thing happened, the strangest thing that had ever happened in my life.

I realized I was being followed. But it was a strange kind of following.

I looked behind me and no one was there. I looked ahead about forty yards and saw a young man in a summer suit.

At first I didn't realize what he was doing. But when I stopped to look in a window and glanced up, I saw that he had stopped eighty or ninety feet ahead of me and was looking back, watching me.

As soon as he saw my glance he walked away, farther on up the street, where he stopped again and looked back.

After a few more of these silent exchanges, it came to me what was going on. Instead of following me from behind, he was following me by leading the way and looking back to make sure that I came along.

The process continued for an entire city block and then finally, at last, I came to an intersection and found him waiting for me.

He was tall and slender and blond and quite handsome and seemed, somehow, to be French; he looked athletic, perhaps a tennis player or a swimmer.

I didn't know quite how I felt about the situation. Was I pleased, was I flattered, was I embarrassed?

Suddenly, confronted with him, I stood at the intersection and said something in English and he shook his head.

He said something in French and I shook my head and then both of us laughed.

'No French?' he said.

I shook my head.

'No English?' I said, and he shook his head and, again, we both laughed because here we were, past midnight in Paris, at an intersection, unable to talk to each other and not quite knowing what we were doing there.

At last, he lifted one hand and pointed off down a side street.

He said a name and I thought it was the name of someone: 'Jim.' I shook my head in confusion.

He repeated himself, and then clarified the word. 'Gymnasium,' he said as he pointed again, stepped off the walk into the street, and turned to see if I was following.

Hesitant, I waited as he walked full across the street to the far curb and then turned again and looked at me.

I stepped off the curb and followed, thinking, What am I doing here? And then, again, What the hell am I doing here? A strange young man at midnight, in hot weather, in Paris, going where? To some strange gymnasium? What if I never come back? I mean, in the middle of a strange city, how come I had the nerve to follow where someone else was leading?

I followed.

In the middle of the next block I found him waiting for me.

He nodded to a nearby building and repeated the word gymnasium. I watched as he started down some steps at the side of the building, and ran to follow. Down we went to a basement door that he unlocked and nodded me into the darkness.

I saw that we were indeed in a small gym with all the equipment that such facilities have: workout machines and block horses and mats. Most peculiar, I thought, and stepped forward as he closed the door.

From the ceiling above I heard distant music and voices speaking and the next thing I knew I felt my shirt being unbuttoned.

I stood in the dark with perspiration running down my arms and off the tip of my nose. I could hear the sounds of his taking off his clothes in the dark as we stood there at midnight in Paris, not moving, not speaking.

Again I thought, What the hell am I doing here?

He took a step forward and almost touched me when suddenly there was the sound of a door opening somewhere nearby, a burst of

laughter, another door opening and shutting, and footsteps and people talking very loudly from above.

I jumped at the noise and stood there, trembling.

He must have felt my movement, for he put out his hands, placing one on my left shoulder, one on my right.

Both of us seemed not to know what to do next, but we stood there, facing each other, after midnight, in Paris, like two actors onstage who had forgotten their lines.

From above there was laughter and music and I thought I heard the popping of a cork.

In the dim light I saw a single bead of perspiration slide down and fall off the tip of his nose.

I felt the perspiration slip down my arms and drip off the ends of my fingers.

We stood there for a long time, not moving, when at last he shrugged a French shrug and I shrugged, too, and then we both laughed quietly again.

He bent forward, took my chin in one hand, and planted a quiet kiss in the middle of my brow. Then he stepped back and reached out and put my shirt around my shoulders.

‘Bonne chance,’ I thought I heard him murmur.

And then we moved quietly to the door and he put his finger to his lips and said, ‘Shhhh,’ and we both went out into the street.

We walked together back up to the narrow avenue that led in one direction to Les Deux Magots, and in the other direction to the river, the Louvre, and my hotel.

'My God,' I said quietly. 'We've been together a half hour and we don't even know each other's name.'

He looked at me inquiringly and some inspiration caused me to lift my hand and jab at his chest with my finger.

'You Jane, me Tarzan,' I said.

This caused him to explode with laughter and repeat what I had said: 'Me Jane, you Tarzan.'

And for the first time since we met, we both relaxed and laughed.

Again he leaned forward and planted another quiet kiss in the middle of my brow, then turned and walked away.

When he was three or four yards off, without turning he said, in halting English, 'Sorry.'

I replied, 'Very sorry.'

'Next time?' he said.

'Next,' I replied.

And then he was gone down the narrow street, no longer leading me.

I turned back toward the river, walked on past the Louvre, and to my hotel.

It was two o'clock in the morning, still very hot, and as I stood inside the door to the suite I heard the bedclothes rustle and my wife said, 'I forgot to ask earlier, did you get the tickets?'

'Oh yes,' I said. 'The Concorde, noon flight to New York, next Tuesday.'

I heard my wife relax and then she sighed and said, 'My God, I love Paris. I hope we can come back next year.'

'Next year,' I said.

I undressed and sat on the edge of the bed. From the far side my wife said, 'Did you remember the pizza?'

'The pizza?' I said.

'How could you have forgotten the pizza?' she said.

'I don't know,' I said.

I felt a peculiar quiet itch in the middle of my forehead and put my hand up to touch the place where that strange young man who had followed me by leading had kissed me good night.

'I don't know,' I said, 'how I could have forgotten. Damned if I know.'

The End