

David Wright

So On

PEOPLE, COMPLETE STRANGERS as well as friends, often make a point to ask me why am I sad. I tell them that I'm not. Then why are you frowning, they ask. Frowning? I didn't know that I was. For a long time I didn't believe I walked around looking like that, but so many people have asked why was I sad or about what was I mad that I began to have doubts. I spent a full fifteen minutes one morning examining my normal expression in the mirror. Studying it so, I realized that I wasn't frowning, I was just not smiling. It's not the same thing.

Down the underground tunnel of the metro, I spot the approaching lights of the train and push forward toward the edge of the platform. The Parisians around me edge forward, too. The train slides to a stop, and I hurry on. The watch on my neighbor's wrist reads five past one. I was supposed to meet Nico Questel and his son Benoît at one o'clock. But, fortunately, I'm only ten minutes away. The train moves from lit station through dark tunnel to a stop at another lit station further on....Notre Dame de Lorette...Trinité...Saint Lazare....

My mind wanders. It's true, I think: I don't go around smiling all the time because I'm leery of those people who do and I don't want to give off the same impression. In fact, the thing that attracted me so much to Paris when I arrived here, about three years ago, was the demeanor of the place. Parisians don't beam gratuitous smiles, just as they don't walk around being loud and carrying on. They're more discreet. There's a sort of grace in their reserve.

When I leave the metro, the April sky is covered gray, promising rain. I finally arrive at their building, a white stone, six-floor walk-up like so many here. As I pass, I give a cursory greeting to the concierge, a round woman who is mopping the entrance hallway, and I bound up the wooden stairs to the third floor and

ring. The door opens almost immediately to Nico's receding back, tucking a black T-shirt into his black jeans and walking towards a back room.

"I'm running late," he says in French. "Benoît is getting ready."

Although Nico speaks English fluently, our conversations are often in French. I speak it pretty well, and I especially like to speak it with my French friends, whether they speak English or not. "*Pas de problème*," I say.

I close the door and sit on the couch. Eva, Nico's wife, works, and Nico, who is a musician, has an appointment at a studio to stand in on keyboards during the recording of a video. In France, children don't have school on Wednesday afternoons, and since Benoît, who usually spends that time with his father, isn't old enough to take care of himself, Nico and Eva have asked me to take care of him for a few hours today. My schedule is flexible, I'm a journalist, so I told them that, of course, it isn't a problem.

All around me Nico's voice echoes to an electric African beat.

Tout le monde est toujours après moi...

Le préfet est toujours après moi...

Their entire apartment resembles a mini-recording studio. Electronic machinery everywhere; stacks of recorders, panels with dials; a guitar leaning in a corner, a saxophone resting in its stand. Nico records his own songs here, sometimes makes videos with his cam-corder. Some of the music is serious which he presents to producers, but much is for fun: for his wife and his son and himself.

He emerges from the back room. I can only hope my smile, when I choose to use it, is half as resplendent as his is now, glowing in a face that's purple like the midnight ocean in moonlight. He says, "Excuse my earlier rudeness," and he extends his hand. Shaking hands here is a formality that's strictly observed. "How are you?" he asks.

"Fine," I say. "Today's your big day."

His laughter erupts outward, his head rolling back on his neck. "Yes," he says. "We'll see."

Nico has all the makings of a pop star except the actual pop star status. Nico, who's from Cameroon, is handsome, not in a

pretty way but rather like an ebony figurine; his charm is magnetic; and he has the look. His body tight like twisted oak, Nico dresses like a rapper: hip-hop caps on a shaved head; baggy trousers, heavy high tops he drags around—but he wears these black, plastic-framed athletic glasses with the strap that betray his humor. Nothing about Nico ever seems serious and sometimes I think that the only reason he's not a star is because he's too sincere. He sings rap to an African beat, usually in French but sometimes in English heavy with an accent that makes him sound like Yul Brynner.

"Benoît, are you ready?" he calls toward the back of their apartment.

"Oui, Papa," returns.

Then out comes Benoît, wearing a raincoat, his neck wrapped in a scarf. He offers me his hand. "Bonjour, Monsieur Max," he says, very seriously. His grip is soft, his hand seemingly boneless.

"Bonjour," I say, "*Monsieur* Benoît," but he does not smile. "You know, if we're going to spend the whole afternoon together, we'd better drop the formalities and just call one another by our first names."

"Okay," he says, still unsmiling, and lets go my hand.

"Shall we?" says Nico, offering the door. On the way down the stairwell, whisking Benoît in front of him, he continues, "Eva will be home early, at five-thirty or six."

"We're still meeting later, right?" I ask as we pass the concierge—Nico and I nod in cursory salutation, but Benoît stops to shake her hand.

"Of course," Nico says, stopping to pull Benoît along by the shoulders. "Say, at seven at the restaurant."

"Bisous for Papa," he says to Benoît, bending over, and they kiss cheeks, once on each. "And thanks again," he says to me, shaking my hand tersely. Then he dashes down the street.

Benoît and I watch him go.

I turn to Benoît. "So, what would you like to do today?"

A woman holding a young boy's hand walks by. Benoît watches mother and child, then says, "I don't know. Whatever you would like."

“I’d like anything you’d like.”

“I’d like to ride the carrousel,” he says without smiling.

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

“That won’t take too terribly long.”

“That’s okay,” he says.

“How about we go see a movie first?”

“Then go to the carrousel?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say.

Turning toward the metro, I look to take Benoît’s hand, but he looks straight ahead and walks very independently beside me. He’s dressed smartly, like so many French kids, sporting the latest fashions, but in sizes humorously small. In his tan trench-coat and scarf, corduroy slacks and brown leather docksiders with tassels, he looks more like a miniature lawyer on his way to court than an eight-year-old in search of a carrousel. Thick like a tree stump and wearing worn denim from the collar down, I almost feel deficient beside him.

At the white-striped crosswalk, he puts his hand in mine, but as soon as we reach the curb Benoît returns it to his pocket. We go down the stairs into the metro and, on the platform, pass two gendarmes who, working their way down its length, are checking identification papers, mostly of Arab and African men. Two more are doing the same thing on the platform opposite. These two don’t stop us, though, and I don’t volunteer for their sweep but rather stroll to the far end and stand next to another black person, a sister who looks like she might be an American tourist. Benoît, hands in his coat pockets, stands beside me. The three of us standing so close together could pass for a family. Not that I’m illegal or anything. I just try to avoid run-ins with the police whenever possible. Being dark like an African and young, I’m often a target, subject to their scrutinizing gazes and patronizing questions until I can free my passport from my pocket and they leave me alone.

On the other platform, a clochard, this disheveled figure with a raspy afro and what look like all his possessions in a frayed backpack, stands looking directly at me which for Paris is, of course,

an oddity. As I notice him, he asks across the tracks in a French voice soft like clouds, “Do you know Jesus?”

I find eccentricity amusing. “No,” I say. “Not personally, that is.” But neither he nor Benoît nor this woman smiles.

The clochard turns toward her—she has acknowledged neither his presence nor mine. “Do *you* know Jesus?” he insists.

Being directly addressed, her stone defenses fall and she fidgets. “No, me neither,” she says in perfect French, but her gaze drops just as quickly then away from us down the tunnel. I’d taken her for African-American, but her unexpected diffidence tells me she’s West Indian or African métisse, her cultural identity more closely tied to the French.

“I am Jesus,” continues the clochard, stretching his arms out over the tracks toward us. And more strongly, “I...AM...JESUS.”

I glance from this woman to the advancing police and back. “That may be,” I say, “but then our friend Jesus there is in a world of trouble again, because my money says he doesn’t have I.D. papers to attest to his holiness.”

Like a French person, she’s again surprised to be addressed by a stranger: she looks at me, and she smiles a smile like Benoît might, which I return before glancing down at my own shoes, somehow surprised myself by our exchange, even though I initiated it. But then her glance slips from me to Benoît and just as quickly away from us, as though, having noted Benoît’s skin tone, which is the color of wheat, she’d unintentionally peeked in on something it wasn’t her business to see.

The train zips into the station at just that moment, separating us from Jesus opposite. We three board by the same door, but she sits in a row with her back to us.

© “Do you want to sit down?” I ask Benoît.

He looks up into my face. “If you want to,” he says, almost as if it were a question.

“No. I’d rather stand,” I say, “but we’d better hold on.”

Benoît stares at my hand, holding the handrail, and places his own a good foot beneath it as the train rolls out of the station. We ride in silence. I don’t know what to say to Benoît, who is purposely looking at the ads posted in the train, at the backs of

strangers' heads, away from me. Periodically, the woman from the platform glances at us by our reflection in the glass, but when she sees me looking, she turns away. Benoît and I get off at Montparnasse station, and I'm happy to leave her.

When we arrive out on the street, the clouds have thickened and it's started to sprinkle, a bad omen for later carousel riding. The dark Tour de Maine stretches heavily upwards out of the surrounding gray buildings but offers no shelter. So I pick up the pace and reach back for Benoît's hand, but he keeps both deep in his pockets, looking straight ahead, and hustles along awkwardly fast in order to keep up.

There's a movie theater on the Boulevard de Montparnasse that regularly plays children's films. Today two cartoons are offered, advertised in larger-than-life Technicolor. "Which would you prefer to see?" I ask.

"I don't mind either," he says. "Which would you prefer?"

I look at the marquis. One features two birds in pilot's gear and seems alive with action and adventure. The other seems more of a lovey-dovey story: a prince and princess holding hands at the top of a long staircase. I scratch my chin. "I guess I'd rather see this one," pointing to the two birds.

"Oh," says Benoît. "Okay." His eyes engage mine, his expression trying so hard to appear impartial that it almost looks sad. And in the tone of his voice I hear disappointment at my choice, which surprises me of an eight-year-old boy.

"But then again," I say, scratching my chin some more in deep reflection. "I'd really rather see this one."

And he smiles.

We get into the line, which is rather long. The rain increases, so I turn up my collar and dig my hands deeper into my pockets. Benoît glances over and, very independently, mirrors my actions, his expression so serious, and for some reason this reminds me that I need to make ID photos at one of those fifteen franc photo-booths that are everywhere, to send with my application to renew my press card which expires in a month. I make a mental note, but fearing I'll forget anyway, I take my four-color pen out of my pocket and make a big red X on the back of my hand.

Benoît looks stunned.

“I write on my hand sometimes,” I say, trying to redress my childish act committed in front of a child, “even though I know I shouldn’t...”

“Your Bic,” he says, mouth agape. “Do all the colors work?”

“Sure,” I say and offer it to him.

He presses the green first and, his fingers fumbling to master the bulky Bic, starts to write in the palm of his hand.

“Whoa, whoa. Don’t write on yourself,” I say, feeling hypocritical. I pull out a scrap bank statement from my back pocket and, with the hand I didn’t write on, pass it to him. “Here.”

He writes his name in meticulous script in all four colors, one below the next. He studies it and smiles. “Ah,” he says, “you’re rich,” returning the Bic and still smiling, and I think that at the end of the day I must make a gift of it to him.

The line inches forward as the rain increases. My jean jacket is getting soaked. I look down at Benoît and notice that his coat is made of rainproof material, so I don’t worry. I say, rather to myself, “I should have worn my *imperméable*, too.”

“What’s an *imperméable*?” Benoît asks.

We move forward two places. “Material that’s impermeable,” I say, “doesn’t allow water to soak through. Like your jacket. That way, you stay dry in the rain.”

“Oh,” he says. “Okay.” Then he looks down at his pants. Jerks his hands from his pockets and feels inside them. Squats and feels inside his shoes. “Me, I’m rich, too,” he says. “I have a coat that is impermeable, pants that are impermeable, and shoes that are impermeable!”

“Yes,” I say. “You are rich.”

At the ticket window, I pay and we go inside. In French cinemas, there are about ten or fifteen minutes of commercials that precede each film. We enter in the middle of one for Evian mineral water that features a lily-white family picnicking in a golden carpet of some grain, snow-capped mountains as a backdrop, and that’s the sum total of what I see of the cartoon I’ve chosen. Zip. Nada. I feel suddenly sleepy, once I’m comfortably settled in these so comfortable cinema seats, I yawn and close my eyes an

instant, and when Benoît nudges me awake some few instants later, the music is blaring, the final credits rolling across the screen, and people are filing out through the illuminated exits.

“It’s finished,” Benoît says, unsmiling.

“Was I...?” I clear my throat. “Was I sleeping?”

I only hope I didn’t snore. Poor kid.

Outside, the rain has stopped, but clouds still crowd the skies from horizon to horizon. I try to amend for my sleeping sickness. “I know this great carousel at the Jardin des Tuilleries.”

“With horses?” he asks. “When I go with Maman and Papa, we always go on carousels with horses.”

“I think so,” I say, thinking, God, I hope so.

We take the metro. When we arrive, the sun is now peeking through cracks in the cloud cover. That, at least, is a relief. There’s a small fair: a ferris wheel, bumper cars and several carousels. But not one with horses.

“I don’t see the horses,” he says.

“Me neither,” I say. “There’s another carousel I know of at...” but his eyes alight looking off in one direction. There, a merry carousel runs a rolling course over miniature hills with many-colored race cars and...

“Motorcycles!” he says.

“Would you like to ride the motorcycles?”

“Oh, yes,” he says up to me.

And we run to the carousel, laughing. He climbs onto a purple cycle behind a blond girl in a green racer. I pay at the ticket counter and give the token to the attendant. Benoît looks from me down to the purple cycle and back to me again. He kicks on the foot-pegs, twists the hand grips, impatient for the cycle to go. He looks back to me, uncertain, then the carousel jerks into motion and his smile returns.

The sun is full out now, the clouds dissipating, and Benoît goes around and around. The blond girl in the green car waves at her parents as she rounds the turn towards us. Benoît watches her, then he waves, too. So I wave back. He leans forward to pick up speed on the downhill side and into the curves. The blond girl slaps the center of her steering wheel, a horn honks and

Benoît jumps, startled. He stands up on the foot pegs to see over her shoulder. Noting the green knob in the middle of her steering wheel, he then notices the green one in the middle of his handle bars. He pushes it down and his horn honks. He laughs. At every return to my side of the carrousel, he smiles and honks and waves. I wave back. Then he leans into the curve, trying to overtake the blond in the green racer.

He rides the motorcycle three times.

After the third ride, I say, "It's getting late. Maybe we should go now."

"Okay," he says, and continues smiling anyway.

An older American couple is pointing toward us. I act as if I don't see them, but as they approach, I hear her say, "Oh, he's cute as a bug's ear, Gerald." She's pointing to Benoît.

I turn to him and say, "Let's go."

"*Par-lez vous an-glais?*" the woman says to me in discordant French.

I turn back toward her and answer, "Fluently."

"Oh, wonderful," she says to her husband Gerald, not realizing I'm American, though I don't understand how she can't. She speaks to me slowly, distinctly pronouncing each syllable. "I would like to pho-to-graph your child," pointing from her camera to Benoît. And smiling.

I don't know how to say no without calling even more attention to this situation. I turn to Benoît, my eyes fixed rather on his shoes, explain to him, "These-uh...people would like to-uh..." But before I can finish Benoît walks away from us like a Cameroonian prince to a spot where the sun rains golden light on his golden skin and he poses, his hands on his hips. He says, "I should have the sun in my face."

I have to smile. "Whenever you're ready," I translate for them.

They take the picture, then thank us one thousand fold as I walk to Benoît and we leave. "No problem," I'm saying over my shoulder. Benoît never even looks back.

It's already past six somehow. I must get Benoît home before Eva starts to worry. Walking up the Jardin towards Place de la Concorde, the nearest metro station, we pass the round pool

where the monstrous gold fish surface and descend like dirty orange submarines. Bands of children push toy wooden sailboats with thin reeds out and across to the other side. In this quiet, I feel a small soft warmth reaching into my hand. I look down and Benoît is smiling up at me, our hands holding.

“Max,” he says, “why are you sad?”

“Sad,” I say. “I’m not sad.”

“You look sad.”

“Oh, no. I’m not sad. Inside I’m very happy.”

“Oh,” he says. “Okay.”

With the sun and this child, I walk past the metro station at Concorde several blocks up to the one at Madeleine, despite the hour. We board the train there. The car is crowded, stuffy, and Benoît, pushed close to the standing handrail, has his soft hand on my hand, holding on. I notice that, with his thumb, he’s rubbing a fleshy spot between my thumb and forefinger. He has been, in fact, to varying degrees of gentleness, since he began holding my hand. The exact same spot. Smiling, looking off elsewhere, but constantly rubbing. It’s like he might kiss it. This makes me uncomfortable, but I try not to show it. Then it makes me think of Margot, the woman I saw for three years before leaving. After we had made love and were lying together, talking, I almost always rubbed with a thumb the puffy pink flesh of one nipple or the other. Gently, but constantly. I wouldn’t have noticed that I was doing it had she not one day snapped at me to stop. I remember something inside sulking down. The funny thing, though, was that I’d never even noticed before that I was doing it, much less that it annoyed her. Margot was white, we didn’t last. Benoît, I hope, will be my friend for a long time. I understand that his rubbing thumb is merely staking a claim, planting a flag in territory he wants to conquer. I refuse to humiliate his innocence. I smile at his smile, and we stand quietly as the crowded train runs on. At their stop, we get off and walk towards his home, holding hands and in the silence of dusk.

We climb the three flights of stairs to their apartment and ring. Eva answers the doorbell after a brief interval. “Hello, you two,” she says, and scoops Benoît up into her arms. She puts him

down, and we kiss cheeks—the female equivalent of the Frenchman’s handshake. Only with women, I never know how many pecks any particular one expects—it varies for people from different regions—and nobody likes to be left standing, lips puckered into empty space, feeling like a stooge. I’ve known Eva as long as I’ve known Nico, and I know that she and I always kiss four times, in the tradition of Africans which she has gotten from him. Still, I ask her, “Three times?”

“No,” she says, “four,” knowing full-well that I know and that I’m only trying to be funny. Eva is Swedish and she looks it—blond hair, fair skin, square jaw. Her voice is like gravel and sometimes I think I hear the disciplined intonation of the Germanic in her speech, but it’s only illusion. Eva has just enough hold to be the mast for Nico’s sail, but she dances on her own winds, too. She asks, “Did you two have a good afternoon?”

“Oh yes, Maman,” Benoît says, tearing his trenchcoat off his back. “Max has a Bic with four colors. Black, and red, and blue, and... Green!” he finally remembers.

“Okay,” Eva says, “don’t just throw your coat on the floor. Hang it up.”

“Can I show her, Max?”

“Of course,” I say and reach into my pocket.

Eva directs us out of the entrance and into the living room—“Come in! Come in!”—as I hand Benoît my Bic. “Can I get you something?” Eva asks. “Coffee, a beer?”

“No, no. Thanks, but I’m late for my rendezvous with Nico.”

“Look, Maman.” Benoît shows her the paper where he’s just written his name in four colors.

Eva studies it, then says, “What a wonderful pen.”

“Oh yes,” says Benoît. He extends it toward me.

“You go ahead and keep it. I have another one just like it at home.”

“Can I?” he asks and looks to his mom.

“Of course,” I say.

“What do you say?” says Eva.

“Thank you, Max.”

Eva says, “Now go put it with your things and wash up.”

Benoît disappears into the back room, and I use the flurry of his exit as a way to make my own. “I’ve got to go,” I say. I am turning to leave, but Eva turns me back around and gives me a long and very warm hug.

“Thank you very much, Max.”

“Yes,” I say, “of course.”

When we separate, I hustle out the door, calling over my shoulder, “Ciao, Benoît. See you next time.”

I hear the scrambling of little feet, then, “See you, Max,” called down the stairwell.

I run to the metro and am lucky to have a train pull up as I step onto the platform. The metro is the fastest mode of transportation available, yet still not fast enough to keep me punctual: it’s five past seven already—five minutes past my meeting time with Nico. The warning buzzer buzzes and the doors slide shut. I hold onto the rail and await our arrival.

The train slips into Arts et Métiers station. Next come Temple, Rambuteau, Hôtel de Ville.... The air around me feels charged, but I want to think about nothing now, so I think about the drivers of these trains. I think about how horrible it would be to be stuck at the controls of one of these things: staring dead straight ahead at dark tunnel walls that lead toward a growing spot of light and into a lit station, staying there only a moment before starting back into more dark tunnel and again to another lit station beyond, and so on. At the endpoint of the line, walking the length of the train to an identical control booth at the opposite end but pointing in the opposite direction. Then resuming the run, hitting all the same stations, only in the reverse order. What a life, I think. A sort of circular Hell on a linear track; only making the predetermined stops, but always making them.

Then I think about Nico. Nico is thirty-three, his life has a rhythm and is solid, but nothing about it seems fixed or predetermined. Rather, like his music, it all seems spontaneous, improvised. And I envy him his life, his child and his wife. Not that I believe that I, in his situation, would be half so fine. But he, in his situation, is beauty in harmony. Sometimes, when I think of Eva, I feel attracted to her. Then I make myself see that it’s not

Eva that is attractive to me, but rather what she is to Nico. And he to her. That thought keeps me mentally wholesome.

The train arrives at Châtelet station, and I get off. I'm meeting Nico at the California Plate, the American restaurant where he cooks from five a.m. to noon, five days a week. At the green and red neon entrance, the hostess recognizes me as a friend of his and smiles. She's dressed to look American—pink diner-waitress's dress, hair pulled into a pony-tail, lips painted fire-engine red—but the French way she carries herself is more pronounced and so she looks rather like an anomaly, the beauty of her charm disfigured. But, in a way, she's a pretty accurate representation of this restaurant. French decorum is way too elegant for a place like this, serving Haut Medoc with chili dogs. Back home or here, it doesn't matter: a rib shack is a rib shack is a rib shack. How can there be an in-between?

The hostess tells me that Nico's at the bar, and I head that way. His smile greets me first. Then I notice the music that's playing: a Nico rap from one of his self-styled tapes. "Catchy tune," I say. "Isn't it, though."

The restaurant is a convenient place to meet, but Nico doesn't like hanging around here too much when he's not working, which I appreciate. So we leave. We cross the Passerelle des Arts, a wooden pedestrian bridge over the Seine, and walk to a little French hang-out, Chez Georges.

Chez Georges is homey and small and always smoke-filled. It's run by an older, very-French couple who try to maintain a Parisian feeling bar in a quarter that's gone to the tourists. French students usually crowd the wooden benches, as do their American counterparts who, for their junior year abroad, convert to Parisian life—what they imagine it to be—as to religion. They buy Bohemian clothes and wear unkempt hair and take up cigarette smoking, only to abandon it all a few weeks before the end of the school year and their imminent returns to the U.S. Neighborhood winos get their drinks here, too. And with the occasional tourists who wander in, the whole makes for an eclectic mix. Tonight the place is nearly empty and that's fine, too. Nico and I sit in a back corner of the tight square room.

Nico gets us beers at the bar. A woman, standing by herself there, watches his return and stares at our table. This is the first I've ever seen her here, but she acts at ease at the bar, like a regular, only the others there, the real regulars—the habitués—don't acknowledge her presence. She's not unattractive, but something about her looks discordant. She's older, or appears to be, has long hair, light but not blond and thin like tissue. Her face seems vacuous, like a wino's, and her clothes—a khaki pantsuit—are nice but rumpled, like she'd spent all day sitting in the streets: a strange appearance for a woman, an older white woman, one who's obviously American and probably a tourist. There's little barroom noise, and she's listening to our conversation without the least unease.

“So, how is your novel coming?” Nico asks in his Yul Brynner English.

“It's coming along fine.” I respond purposely in French.

But Nico persists in English. “Are you finished?”

So I shift to English, too. “A few chapters are.”

“Not more?”

“I write what I can, Nico.”

“Ah, Max,” he sighs, then laughs.

Sometimes Nico doesn't understand me, our worlds are so different. He often accuses me of not acting on my dreams. “It takes a lot to write a novel and get a contract,” I say. “And you have to know the right people. Plus, the journalism takes so much time.” Nico thinks I'm in France because I want to be a writer.

I glance toward the bar, my glance falling on the woman there. She responds by coming to our table and sitting on the wooden bench beside us. Or rather, beside me. Shit, I think. But Nico greets her with a smile. Everything's a joke to him.

She asks us where we're from in an English slow like syrup and sticky with an accent I can't pinpoint. Nico laughs at her question and says that, of course, he is from, “Pah-ree!” But she is apparently more interested in my response.

Her stare is unnerving. I look off towards the door, say that I'm from Florida.

“Florider,” she says. Then she asks what we’re doing here.

Nico, still smiling, reiterates that he is French and therefore lives here.

“French, hunh?” she says, not really as a question but like a stone-faced judge looking down from the bench. She asks me if I’m a writer, although she already knows the answer, and when I say that I am, she levels her judgmental “Hunh?” on me. And she just stares.

This woman’s shining for me, and it’s embarrassing, strange, but also familiar—vaguely inviting—so I just want her to take her rumpled pantsuit and nasty accent back to the bar and away from us. I turn to where she’d been standing there: the barman, Georges, is looking on and smiles sympathetically.

Her voice drags and whines: she’s telling us about teaching, that she’s a teacher, and Nico makes a joke of pretending to be interested. “Where do you teach?” he asks, and she says she teaches in New York City now (and I finally place the ugly accent: all those r’s tacked on uselessly to the ends of words). And she’s staring straight at me as she continues, saying that she taught for awhile in “Florider.” “To those mindless people there,” she says.

“Florida,” I say, “you know Florida?”

“I know Florider. Miami, Key Biscayne,” she says. “Just like I know New York. I teach in ghetto schools in New York. Reading, writing. Teach little colored kids how to cross the street, how to keep straight between the white lines so they don’t get hurt. And they love me,” she says.

Nico’s response is to laugh, his laughter egging her on, keeping her here, and that rubs as much as her insistent presence.

“And you,” I hear her say to me, “so you’re here looking for love like every other dumb shmuck American in Paris?”

“Looking for love? I never said that.”

“You’re a writer,” she says. “What else do writers do?”

“I’m a journalist,” I say.

“A journalist, hunh? You don’t look like a journalist.”

I just want her to stop now. “I work for a financial quarterly,” I say to shut her up, “for American businesses abroad. I report on currency trends in Europe....”

“Eurodollars,” she says. “Why would anyone want to write about Eurodollars?”

“Eurodollars...?” I turn toward Nico. “Eurodollars’ don’t even exist. I write about...”

“How old’re you anyway? You can’t be older than twenty-five.”

“I’m twenty-six.”

“Why would anyone bring some twenty-six year old black kid from Florider to France to write about Eurodollars?”

“Look...”

“What, you like this one or something,” she’s pointing at Nico, “trying to plant roots?” And she laughs. “Real faux Frenchmen.”

“Look...” is all I can say. I turn toward Nico, whose face is fighting a smile. Toward the bar: Georges isn’t even looking anymore. “Look,” I say, “maybe they want me around because I’m good, because I have a lot of experience on newspapers...”

“At twenty-six?”

“Maybe I’ve been working on newspapers for nearly ten years. At college,” I say. “And at the *Miami Herald*!...”

“Florider,” she says. “Mindless people.”

I don’t know what to say. She’s turned toward Nico (“And what about you?” “Yes, what about me?”) and I don’t know what to say. Sitting there, sad and pathetic, a drunk, probably sixty (“You must be a musician or something.” “Now what makes you say that?”) her features disjointed like a Picasso portrait (“Oh, I know all about you.”) and trying to make me out to be something I refuse to be (“You know nothing about me.”).

A rib shack is a rib shack, I guess. There is no in-between.

“You find Paris a waste,” Nico, his entire face a Sambo smile, is saying. “How long have you been here?”

My own face is hot. I make myself not look at her. I’m looking at the barman Georges, who is washing glasses, at the regulars at the bar, at Nico...

“One month,” I hear her say. “I got an open ticket, I’m going back soon.”

“How old are you anyway?”

“How old?” She looks into her glass. “I’m fifty-three.”

“Hunh,” he says, still smiling. “Same age as my mother.”

A sudden silence bursts over the room. She looks suddenly small, sitting there slumped over her wine. She takes a long drink, emptying her glass, her eyes fixed on its base. “Yeah,” she says after a pause, not in agreement but as a conjunction. “You,” she says to Nico, “you’re tough. You’ll make it in this world. But *you*. You’re too nice.”

I don’t say anything. Don’t even acknowledge that she’s spoken. I just sit there.

But Nico’s laughter shatters the scene, filling the room with a different flavor. She gets up, returns her empty glass to the bar, and leaves.

After she’s gone, with the bad feel of her still burning my eyes, I say, “Let’s split.” Nico just laughs, so I get up and go. As I pass, Georges tries to apologize, “*Elle est casse-couille, cette dame,*” but I bee-line out the door and take the direction opposite the one she took.

Nico catches up to me on the street, his face fighting to appear serious, and silently walks beside. We walk. “You shouldn’t let people like that get to you,” he says finally.

“I know,” I snap. “But she just...pissed me off!” is all I say, because I know Nico wouldn’t understand.

He bursts out laughing again. So I stop and glare at him, which makes him laugh even harder—black boy bent at the waist in the middle of the walk, ha-haing so hard his glasses fall from his face and are suspended there in mid-air like an Ed Wood spaceship by the black athletic strap that keeps them from crashing against the pavement. This makes me laugh. This, and the release of tension his laughter has touched off. We’re quite a sight there in discreet Paris, blocking the way, our rough laughter working us over, spending us.

“Come on,” I say, trying to regain control of my breathing. “Let’s go to the café at Odéon.”

Nico nods and follows. Once there, we stand at the bar, order two beers and watch the happenings in the café. Nico’s smile never stops, and he’s not one for silence. “Why did this woman make you so angry?”

“I don’t know, Nico.” I want to change the subject.

“You often ask yourself the same questions. About your home. About love. Have you still found no answers?”

But today these subjects won’t go away.

“You know,” Nico says, “if you continue flogging yourself so, someday you’re sure to be sainted.”

I laugh. “Yes. Someday.”

I’ve already finished my beer, so I turn toward the bartender and order two more.

“Didn’t you ever ask yourself a bunch of questions,” I ask Nico, “before marrying Eva?”

“A bunch of questions?”

“Sure.” The two beers arrive and I take a long sip of mine. “I mean... Eva’s white.”

He gasps and covers his mouth with his hand.

“I don’t mean that poorly, you know that.” Nico’s smile reassures me. “But didn’t you consider that? Didn’t you ask yourself, before you got married, if she could be the woman of your life? Not so much, could you love her—I mean, obviously you do—but rather, did you, you know, love *her*?”

Nico drinks long and is reflective. “No. Not like that.”

“No?”

He says, “Eva and I, we enjoy being together. Although she is white, we have very similar interests. But even if she were black, we would have to work hard to maintain our relationship day to day.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that for two people who are different, and two people are always different, whatever the color of their skin, conflict is normal. When you decide to marry, it’s because you have arrived at a point when you want someone in your life, despite this. You’re twenty-five or thirty, and you’ve been alone...”

“Alone?”

“Yes,” he says, “alone. Sure, you work with people and see friends for a drink, but you’re alone in your bed, which is the closest substitute to the quiet of your head that you have. You’re alone there every night. When you’re tired of that loneliness, you look. And usually you find.”

This seems like a sell-out, like some sort of unspoken deal—just a business transaction like any other. Barter: you provide me with this and I'll give you that, you offer me constancy and I'll be here in your bed for you every night. I'm suddenly sad with disappointment and don't want him to go on. But he does.

"Once you've found that person, keeping her is not always so easy. It's rather difficult. Eva, she supports me in my music and my other pursuits. And I try to support her. And that's hard work. Marriage isn't about race," he says, "it's about concessions."

Just so much business, I think. He's right. Business has little to do with race; it's all about interests.

"After we'd met but before we were married," Nico continues, seeming to sense my apprehension, "we both did our own thing for awhile. Saw others. You understand. But after we got together, after we decided we were better off together and decided to have children, then our lifestyles had to change."

"But..." I want to say that that's not love, Nico. It's okay, it works for you, you're content, and Eva's content, and your lives function and flow. But that's not love. "I guess I'm not ready for that sort of arrangement," I say instead. "I'm very independent. Maybe I'm not quite ready for love."

Nico slips into French. "No, you misunderstand me. Eva and I, we're good friends—good, good friends. We try hard and are sometimes very in-love with each other. But true love isn't about Eva and me, it's about Benoît and me."

"Benoît?"

"Yes," he says. "Watching him grow, and giving him so much because he demands that much and more. Even the most simple things, he doesn't know how to do himself. So you do them for him, and teach him how they're done. You watch his face as he catches on, his joy at growing older and becoming more self-sufficient. And you watch your true love slowly go away."

"Yes," I say. "Yes."

Nico looks into his beer and smiles then looks away.

We have two more beers in a silence unburdened by thought and that feels good. Nico asks if I'd mind if he telephoned Eva, to have her join us. I say, of course not. In fact, Eva should join

us. He goes to call. I stand at the bar, not thinking, just watching the happenings around the café, waiting.

It's late, already past four, when we finally decide to call it a night. Eva left Benoît to sleep over with the concierge and her family and joined us at the café before we moved onto other stops. Now, hours later, I leave them at a taxi stand and begin to walk home, as the metro has long since closed for the night. It's a nice night, crisp. I'm alone on the street, the traffic is thin, and my mind is clear and doesn't stray.

I walk down the Boulevard Saint Germain the twenty minutes or so to the Seine and cross at Place de la Concorde and the Jardin des Tuilleries. Passing alongside the metal grating that encloses the Jardin, I stop, peer inside. I gaze over the shadows of trees that color the shadows of the night in the Jardin des Tuilleries. And I'm comfortable in the crisp quiet and cold here. But I also know that I'm in the space between last night and the new morning, and that I can't stay here forever.

I cross the Rue de Rivoli, stride toward Madeleine. News of the daybreak's imminent arrival filters in over rooftops and between buildings. The sky seems to lighten with my every step, and I see that this morning mimes yesterday, cloudy and gray. I'm still dressed as I was then, wearing worn denim from the collar down, and the need to get home, to get undressed and to sleep and to whatever today is to bring seems increasingly urgent. I decide to take the metro at Madeleine. It doesn't open until five, but I'll get to my bed sooner if I wait to catch the first train rather than walk to Abbesses, where I live. When I glance at my watch, it's already ten past somehow.

At Place de la Madeleine, I step out of the gray chill down into the warmth of the metro. On the way to the platform, I pass a fifteen franc photo-booth—I must have passed it ten thousand times before (this afternoon with Benoît, for instance); still, I notice it here as for the first time. Remembering the pictures for my press card, I step inside. In the darkened glass facing me is me—my reflection, somber and serious. There's no one around, the ticket seller isn't even at the counter, and I get comfortable

with the discomfort of sitting there, studying myself. I put first a ten-, then a five-franc coin in the slot and the flash goes—once... twice—as I consider whether or not to smile. I think of Benoît with the sun in his face, and as the fourth flash ignites, I let one corner of my mouth climb.

I'm waiting, alone on the platform. I look down the dark tunnel, listen for some sign of the train's approach, impatient for it to come. I see its lights, shining up from Concorde, before I hear any sound. Smoothly, the train slides to a stop beside me, and I board. The stations up ahead—Saint Lazare, Trinité, Notre Dame de Lorette...—are all the same. I know them by heart. When I come out from underground will be the new morning. Like yesterday, it promises rain.

The warning buzzer buzzes and the doors slide shut. There's a moment's hesitation before the train begins its smooth acceleration into the dark tunnel and toward the lit stations beyond.

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Dara Wier

A STICK, A CUP, A BOWL, A COMB

These were some of their laws:
These were a few of the miles they cruised:
Here is where their beds went down:
With this their fate was sealed:
These are some things they shared:
These were with what they were comforted:
In this manner were they made to be cared for:
In these ways were they shaped to be seen:
Among these things were what they could bear:
In this time here is what they will be shown:
With this will they be remembered:
These were some of their customs:
These were with what they kept to themselves:
Here is a place they questioned:
In this way were they asked to provide:
There were what they provided:
In these instances thus were they praised:
It was with this were they wondering:
These were with what they marked themselves:
With this will they be never forgotten:
These were some of their means:
Here is an example of one of their methods:
With this did they solace themselves:
With this did they adorn themselves:
In these ways did they keep their provisions:
This is what they did with what they were fond of:
By this practice did they shore up magnificence:
These were what they were asked to furnish:
They caused these things to be memorized:
These were their most common rituals:
Among these these were considered unnecessary:

And in these were they in surplus:
These things they misused:
And prized:
And forfeited:
And pitied:
By these means did they resist their discovery:
These were some of the choices they made:
With these did they choose to be represented:
With these did they divine:
And with this were they occupied:
With these things did they labor:
For these things did they hope for:
For these did they say they would die for:
These were the bargains they struck:
This is what they were given in exchange:
This is how they recognized one another:
By these means was love aroused:
Here are fragments of what they worshipped:
Among these things they passed their days:
Here is what they were willing to sacrifice:
In the traces of these things they were known by:
This is what they have left:
Here is where they left without a trace:
These were some of their gifts: