

Martin Kleinman

When Paris Beckons

Paris ignored Nash. His man-child ensemble – tee-shirt, cargo shorts, sneakers, and fanny pack – was considered an American abomination. Everyone, even *les flics*, dismissed him on sight, with a knowing eyebrow elevation and rueful cluck of the tongue.

Nash knew better. But persistent pandemic lockdowns and requisite remote work took its toll. He looked like an unmade bed. His muscle tone grew slack. He'd pass a comb through his thinning hair, don his button-down "Zoom shirt" and dutifully run team meetings. It was back to tee-shirts and sweatpants as soon as he clicked on the red "end meeting for all" button.

The months passed, the bodies piled up, and spirits slid down.

And then his wife died.

Nash's mind fogged. People, places, things. They all evaporated in a *poof* of forgetfulness, his memory an Etch-A-Sketch. He rarely left his once-tidy apartment, which now smelled like a hamper. Weekdays, weekends. What was the difference? It all melted into one long thrum of numbness. One Saturday morning, as he watched his umpteenth consecutive rerun of "Law & Order", finally deciding he preferred the Elisabeth Röhm years to the Alana De La Garza period, his reverie was shattered by a pounding on his door. It was his upstairs neighbor. Nash had left the burner on after cooking his oatmeal breakfast. Thankfully there was no harm done, other than the residual stench from his scorched saucier.

The very next day, he was called by the 78th Precinct; his car was found by the NYPD twenty miles away.

“No, that can’t be; it’s parked right in front of my building,” Nash said.

“You sure about that?” the cop asked. Nash looked out his kitchen window to the street below. An Outback was parked where his Audi should have been. The cop said his car was taken for a little ride by two teens, who found it unlocked and still running.

Nash knew. It was time to get a grip, reboot his life. Nash burrowed through his sock drawer, found his passport and booked himself a round-trip flight to Paris.

Nash spent an entire morning in Bon Marché and yet left the department store empty-handed. He must have spent a half-hour shuffling around the men’s shoe department, where a cluster of clerks ignored Nash’s nervous questions about sizing and prices. Determined to converse in the mother tongue, he blurted in his miserable French, “*Pardon... a quelle heure sont ces chaussures?*”

That is: “What time are these shoes?”

Motorcycles roared on Rue de Sèvres as he walked to the river in search of a midday repast. He ambled up Rue Dauphine and peeked into the window of Le Gagnants. It was a modest Left Bank boîte that sold the locals their essential food groups: Marlboros, wine, the ubiquitous *sandwich jambon comté*, and oysters on the half-shell. “WHEAT-truh,” Nash repeated to the sultry voice on his translation app.

Once inside the restaurant, he took a seat at the bar and, as in the department store, became The Invisible Man. Everyone but Nash was quickly served. Nothing worked, not smiling, waving, or emphatic throat-clearing. He then tried Plan B, a failed French nonchalance. He channeled his inner Charles Boyer and pursed his lips as the natives did. He dispassionately held a forefinger aloft. He raised an eyebrow. All to no avail.

It was time for Plan C: patience. He was on vacation. No need to hurry, no schedules to keep. He dug a *Tour D’Eiffel* postcard and BIC pen out of his red fanny pack and wrote to his son, a college freshman at NYU.

“Dear Adam,” he wrote. Long pause, as he wrestled in vain for words of parental relevancy, an exercise that proved pathetic. Finally, he wrote: “Paris is ‘high key lit’, it being the City of Light and all. LOL. This

place is my jam.” He looked up to see a woman staring at him with an intensity typically reserved for bomb defusion. She was sheathed in a scarf doubled about her neck, a Christo-like triumph of cashmere and silk.

“A postcard? *Sérieusement?*” she said, taking a sip of rosé. “*Abdorabble.*”

He shrugged his shoulders up to his ears.

“I find your particular situation *intairesting*,” she said. “Next time, you might consider long pants, a proper shirt, and – please – *dehfehbnitely* a hard ‘no’ to your little red pack. In that way, you will not again die from thirst.” She caught the bartender’s eye, and after a brief exchange, a glass of *vin rouge* materialized for Nash.

“My name is Céline.” She extended her glass to his. “*Santé.*” Nash froze in the struggle to formulate a proper French response.

She shook her head and laughed. “Now, typically, *you* say, ‘And...my...name...is...’ or – even better – *je m’appelle* – and then, you tell *me* that name,” she said. “That is usually the way these things work.”

His face was redder than a *macaron à la fraise*. “Nash. My name is Nash,” he stuttered.

“Nash? *Nash?* I see. ‘My name is Nash. How do you do?’ I come from ‘wherever’ and my wife’s name is...”

In many situations, his response might have been considered an own-goal, a conversational gaffe. But, at this moment, it was Nash’s elemental truth: “Frankie – Francesca – died,” he said. “She got the Covid virus in June of 2020, and...”

Céline’s smile vanished. “*Désolé,*” she said, touching his forearm with honest concern. “I am sorry to tease you in this way.”

A man in a snug sport coat came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. Nash looked down and saw the man’s green-apple suede shoes secured by triple Velcro straps. Céline made the introductions. Her friend’s name was Thierry. Thierry’s reptilian smile was as skimpy as his slacks. Thierry spoke to Céline in French and handled her check.

She took Nash’s hands in hers, leaned forward, and smiled. “Bye bye, Nash. Promise me you will try to cheer up and have some fun in Paris, ok?” Céline said, like a mom tousling the hair of her toddler at daycare drop-off. “And please, remember. A certain decorum! Long pants! A proper shirt! No fanny pack, right?”

Nash, a non-smoker, thought eleven Euros for cigarettes was excessive, but he pointed to the compact blue pack and the clerk complied. “*Go-l’WAZZ*,” Nash practiced as he continued north towards Pont Neuf and over to the Right Bank. The fanny pack reviled by the locals was weighted down with an engraved padlock he wanted to attach to the ancient bridge. He read in his out-of-date guidebooks that it was custom for lovers to fasten so-called “love locks” to the River Seine crossings, inscribed with a little message. As the tradition went, the lock was attached to a gate on the bridge and the key tossed into the river, to signify “*amour pour toujours*”.

Nash and Frankie had intended to take a romantic Paris holiday and do the padlock thing. And then Covid happened. With college in lockdown, Adam came home for remote studies. “Oh well,” Frankie said. “We got our refunds, and Paris will be there when this thing blows over.”

By summer, she was done.

And here he was, months later, about to cross the Seine without the love of his life, only to find the bridges bare, stripped clean of the *serrures d’amour*.

Channeling the profiling skills he learned on “Law & Order”, he scanned the streets for a native English speaker. That is, someone unkempt or, at best, lacking a certain sense of style.

Cars and scooters whizzed by. A guy on a jet-black Moto Guzzi motorcycle zoomed past. His passenger was a medical skeleton, and “she” was decorated with Gallic flair: a crimson bandana and red patent leather stilettos. Apparently they killed, Nash thought in a rare flash of humor, as he locked eyes with a beer-bellied guy. Strip mall haircut, stained cargo shorts, REI fanny pack: “Bingo,” Nash whispered to himself, before addressing the tourist.

“*Pardon*,” Nash croaked. “*Parlez-vous anglais?*”

“Uh, yah, sure.”

Nash breathed a great sigh of relief. “Do you have any idea what happened to the locks?”

“Oh, yah, the locks. Hang on just a sec,” the tourist said, with an unmistakable accent of the American upper Midwest. He plucked a dog-eared edition of “Lonely Planet – Paris” from his right cargo pocket.

“I just read about that at the McDonald’s on the Rue de Rivoli. They had a Five Guys burger shop just up the street, dontcha know, but...”

“The locks?”

“Right. Here it is. It says they took down the locks on a lot of the bridges in ’14, and on Pont Neuf – that’s this one – four years later. It says the locks weighed like forty tons and the bridge is from the 16th century. So it wasn’t looking good, structurally speaking.”

“Thanks. That is, *merci beaucoup, monsieur.*”

“You betcha. Have fun.”

That was the second person to tell him to “have fun”, a tall order for Nash given his state of disrepair. The lockdowns, social distancing, and mask mandates were in the rearview. Yet it took great effort for Nash to leave his New York apartment, rejoin society, and vacation in Europe.

His was a newly-acquired agoraphobia. He remembered how, just days before his journey, he had to will himself to harvest weeks’ worth of stacked up mail. He grabbed a WNYC tote bag, took a deep breath, left his apartment, and headed down the hall.

Two floors down, the elevator doors parted for a natty, older man, a stranger to Nash. The doors closed and the stranger launched into a rant.

“How do I live by myself after 43 years of marriage?” he asked, looking directly into Nash’s eyes. “I’ve never been alone in all that time. I thought she had a cold. She died in three days.

“I’m suing for malpractice!” And at that, the elevator doors opened.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” Nash said, in a near-faint at the thought of his own recent losses. His mother, mother-in-law, sister, two work colleagues, his son’s best friend, and his childhood friends Larry, Joanne, and Nicky all died of Covid within eighteen months. Life had become a deadly game of Tetris. Once, the slow tumble of little disease-blocks was manageable, but now they descended far too fast. It was game-over in a mere moment.

Finally, even Frankie faltered. She was Nash’s rebar, his steel, his stability.

They were both successful. She designed fabric patterns for a leading bedding maker, and he was group creative director for an ad agency. They both oozed creativity. But she was truly engaged with her work while he knew, he *really* knew, in his heart of hearts, that he was simply slinging shit. Every week, come late Sunday

night, the psychic fog rolled in. He couldn't help but wonder, as the old Peggy Lee song goes, "Is That All There Is?", as he sky-hooked another empty can of PBR into the bin.

He crossed the Pont Neuf and soon passed a Louis Vuitton shop. Then, Gucci. Uniqlo. He veered east on Rue de Rivoli into a quicksand of colonialization: McDonald's, Foot Locker, Ray-Bans, Levi's. He braced himself and turned left at Sketchers. After a short uphill slog on Rue Saint-Denis, a payoff: there, a bustling outdoor market around the ancient *Fontaine des Innocents* plaza, stalls loaded with luscious breads, cheeses, and charcuterie.

He looked across the street and spied the Five Guys burger joint referenced by "cargo pants-guy" back on Pont Neuf. He sat on the plaza's stone border wall, worn smooth by centuries of *culs*.

Nash noticed a nymph sculpted into the mid-sixteenth century fountain. The planes of her face belonged to his wife. "What would you like?" he asked Frankie. She replied in French and he understood every word. Thrilled with his newfound command of French, he made small talk with the food stall vendors, and procured lunch victuals for two.

Down the aisles they sauntered. Two hundred grams of Gruyere from the cheese monger, who shared a joke about the on-again, off-again sunshine. Next, olives *Noires de Nyons*, selected after they sampled several varieties proffered by the beefy owner. Then, on to the charcuterie stall, where two hundred grams of *Jambon de Bayonne* set him back about eighteen Euros. Well worth it, Nash thought, savoring the buttery texture and delicate flavor.

Finally, he bought a two-foot long baguette, which he tucked under his arm. He flashed on their first Christmas Eve together so many years ago, in Frankie's little West Village apartment. While she prepared their little feast – veal parm, he remembered – she sent him out to wait on line for a large semolina bread from the long-gone Zito's, on Blecker Street. The line stretched way down the block, for these were fresh baked loaves from the best of the old-time bakeries in the Italian enclave.

He clutched his treasure and tucked it under his arm, eager to return to Frankie's warmth. As the powdery magic of the snow sifted past streetlamps, the conveyor belt of boxed breads from the little shop's

basement oven to the street stopped, and the owner screamed to the throng: “That’s it! That’s all she wrote! That’s it!” His was the last loaf.

He took Frankie’s hand and walked back to sit on the cool stone around the plaza. He portioned the feast for two with a French-made Opinel pocket knife Frankie handed him.

“Nom nom nom,” she laughed, chomping great chunks of cheese and ham, with that smile and twinkle in her eyes he missed so. It seemed a lifetime ago that he said his goodbyes to her on Face Time. Frankie’s hospice nurse held the phone at bedside as Nash bit hard on his tongue and offered a tortured smile of support for his fast-fading wife because, as his dad drilled into his head so many decades ago, “big boys don’t cry.”

“That was good. Let’s take a walk,” he said, packing the leftovers into his red fanny pack, still laden with his lock. They passed a *chapellerie*. Their noses were pressed to the window. The owner waved them inside. Frankie’s jaw dropped like a little kid in a candy shop. In advance of the warmer weather ahead, the shop was stocked with stylish straw hats.

Frankie whispered in his ear. “You did great at the farmers market,” she said. “Keep it going. They love the small talk!”

Nash learned his lessons well and quickly found that the shop owner’s daughter, Lili, also attended NYU. This led to a warm exchange of photos and shared parental pride.

Finally, the talk turned to hat selection. “That one,” Nash pointed. It was a short-brimmed, ribboned affair worthy of Daisy Buchanan, and it worked perfectly with Frankie’s cheekbones and short coiffure. She tried it on, did multiple goofy Zoolander “Blue Steel” poses in the full length mirror, and flashed a smile of pure delight.

“We’ll take it,” he said, as she stood on her toes to kiss his cheek.

“Wait,” the owner said, producing a magnificent silk scarf the color of raspberry sorbet.

“Try it,” Nash said. Frankie knew the double-twist scarf style worn by the locals. The store owner leaned back, hands on hips, with a big grin.

“*Parfaite*,” he said.

“*D’accord*,” Nash said. “We’ll take it, as well.”

As they walked arm-in-arm through the Les Halles neighborhood, Nash's pace slowed to the easy gait of the *boulevardier*. Finally locked into vacation mode, he looked down to see he now wore a long-sleeved white shirt, open at the neck, a blue blazer, linen slacks and walnut brown oxfords. He smiled at small children and nodded to their parents as he entered *Place de Vosges*, a lush green square teeming with family joy.

"Look at that little nugget," Frankie whispered, pointing to a tyke furiously pedaling a tricycle. "He reminds me of Adam at that age, no?"

Nash sighed. Ah, Adam, set sail now on the great voyage of his life. Nash's parental role had been reduced to that of an excellent waiter; unobtrusively standing off to the side, yet poised in anticipation for a signal for assistance.

Nash and Frankie sat on one of the green wooden benches surrounding the park's center lawn and fountain. All too soon, Frankie took his hand and rose. "Already?" he asked. She smiled and they walked west, past the falafel shops of *Rue des Rosiers*. Both ends of the street in this, the *Quartier Juif*, were guarded by groups of French soldiers in camouflage and Kevlar, toting submachine guns, their fingers near the trigger. Secure in this zone of safety, he ordered two falafels with everything, on whole wheat pita. They laughed as blobs of tahini dribbled down their fingers, just like back in New York, when they'd meet for street-lunch on 50th Street and gobble the goodies from the Israeli falafel cart guy. Invariably, wayward tahini would target his tie and Frankie would howl, oblivious to the squish of sauce on her skirt.

Minutes later, they arrived at the art-cinema complex, *Centre Pompidou*. It all seemed so familiar to Nash, although he had never been there before. He smiled at Frankie as they rode the escalator to the top floor. "I want to show you something," Frankie said. Together, they gazed first at the low-rise buildings surrounding Pompidou, and then farther up the hill to the north.

There, not half a kilometer in the distance, *Sacré-Cœur* stood, gleaming white in the clear blue sky of Paris. “You know I have to go, right?” Frankie said.

Nash knew. “Can we say a prayer?” he said.

“A prayer?”

A tear fell to Nash’s old tee-shirt. “Yes, a prayer for all the fallen, for all those who have yet to fall. A prayer for Adam. And for you, Frankie. I miss you so.”

Together, facing *Sacré-Cœur*, their hearts surged. Theirs was a simple cry of gratitude, joy and love, in the midst of such trial.

When they were finished, Nash reached into his cargo shorts pocket for a tissue. Alone now, he walked to a north-facing Pompidou gallery gate, opened his red fanny pack one last time, held his love lock and, with finality, snapped it shut on the metal rail.

“*Amour pour toujours, Frankie,*” Nash said, holding the key tight.

Back on the street, he walked south, towards the Seine. He recalled seeing a certain shoe store just across from the *Fontaine des Innocents*. He walked in, made enough small talk in his fractured French for the salesperson to smile, and pointed to a pair of suede high-topped shoes with Velcro closures. “*Quarant-six,*” he said in answer to the clerk’s query. They fit perfectly.

Up the street, a men’s store, for some long pants and a long-sleeved patch-pocket shirt. It was a long day, time to return to the Left Bank. Nash found the dressing room and changed into his new shoes, shirt and slacks.

Once outside, he balled his old tee-shirt, sneakers, and cargo shorts into his fanny pack, and stuffed it into a trash bin on *Quai du Louvre*.

Then, just past the midway point of *Pont Neuf*, he kissed his key goodbye and sky-hooked it into the River Seine, where it softly settled into the silt, carpeted now with yet another sweet remembrance of forever love.

