

Kabul Journal
by
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Chapter 8 – Suzanne’s Paris

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I’m sitting in Terminal 2F at Charles de Gaul Airport, waiting for my flight to Dubai. Stopping over in Paris is an experiment, to see if an overnigher in Europe helps with jet lag and the psychological transition back to my surreal life in Kabul.

I’m returning from my first trip home as part of my leave agreement with Texas A&M – two weeks back in the office for every three months in Afghanistan.

I arrived yesterday morning in Paris after the 10 hour overnight plane ride from Houston. It takes Air France an hour to get the bags out; then the taxi driver doesn’t know where my hotel is, so I don’t arrive at the hotel until noon. The hotel is located in the heart of the city, and my room has spectacular views of the Louvre and Eiffel Tower. But I’m pressed for time and ignore the view, only 25 hours until my flight to Dubai. After a quick, revitalizing shower, I am out of the hotel.



The sidewalk is full of pedestrians in spite of the chill and overcast skies. I walk across the busy, noisy *Rue de Rivoli* and into calm and quiet park across the street, the *Jardin des Tuileries*. This famous park was originally commissioned by Queen Catherine de Medici in 1568 and runs along the River Seine. The densely planted trees in the park are still bare with no sign of spring buds, but from the center of the park, the lack of leaves provides unobscured views of the Louvre and all the way to the Arch of Triumph.



I leisurely stroll through the park, pausing to watch a young boy play with homemade sail boats. I try to avoid being caught by the mainly French tourist as they take photos of themselves standing in front of the glass pyramid entrance to the Louvre.



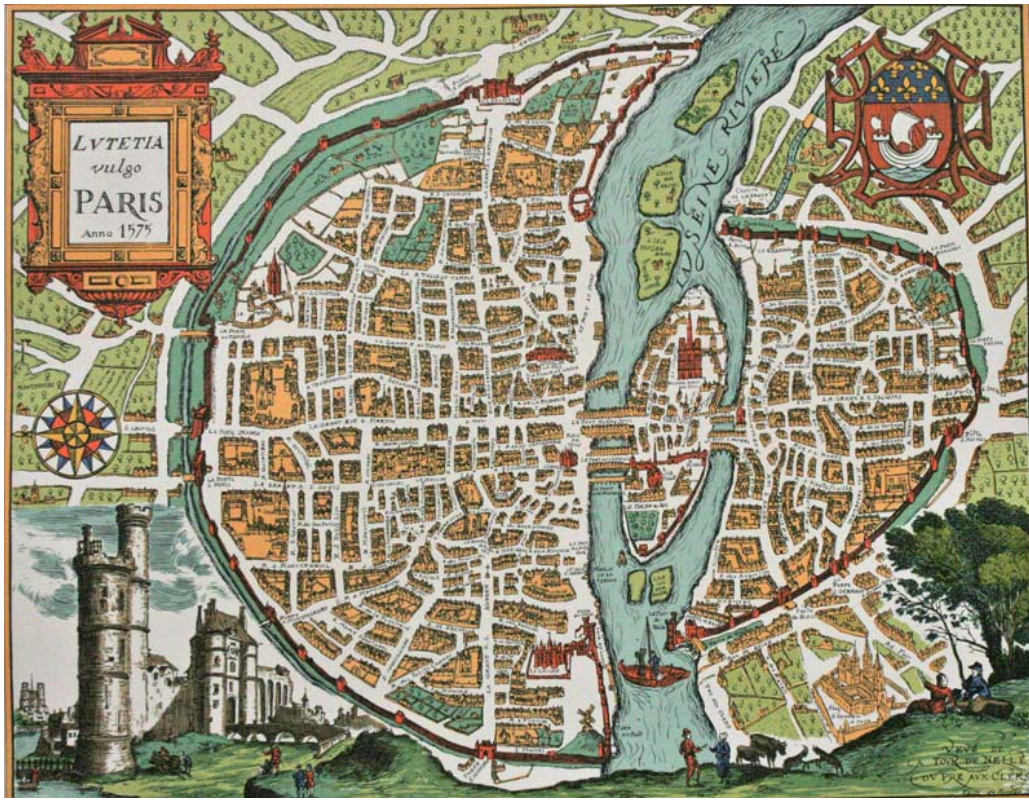
I'm headed to *Notre Dame* which is the focal point of my favorite part of Paris, the tightly packed neighborhoods and confused maze of streets that comprise the part of the city that was once surrounded by a wall.



I imagine Hugo's hunchback up among the gargoyles of the cathedral, and for a moment see an unruly Parisian mob in *Notre Dame's* plaza instead of the crowd of tourists with their digital cameras and guidebooks.

I wandered around through the old city, past the many sidewalk cafes, shops, and the upscale and seedy hotels that give this area so much character.







Perhaps I'm drawn here by all those books I read while in college, about young poets and thinkers, struggling out an existence in old Paris, London or Vienna, while watching their idealism disintegrate because of poverty or politics, social pressure, love or misfortune, forcing them to give up their bohemian life styles and dreams of a better world, or give up on their desires for something more than a conventional life, and wife and kids can bring.

Perhaps I'm drawn here because of Suzanne. In my life Suzanne is somewhere between a dream and fantasy. I have no regrets about Suzanne. Perhaps she was a crossroads in my life. But if so, the way she pointed was too murky to see for me then or now. But what is for sure, in 24 hours Suzanne and I experienced all the romance and endless possibilities that only youth and Paris working together can muster.

I was a young man of 24 years, finally off and away from my life of the past few years of struggling with the conflict between poverty and an unyielding desire to complete my university degree. Hard construction work provided the funds for me to scrape up the dollars for tuition and food, and occasionally rent.

One semester, the combination of work, student aid and plasma "donations" was insufficient. I found myself not a student worried about homework assignments and upcoming exams, but working as a day laborer on a job pouring concrete for a new high rise government office building near the Texas Capital in Austin. From the fourteen floor where we were pouring the concrete columns to support upper stories, I could look over to the University of Texas and the promise that it held for a different life, so close, yet at the moment so far away.

But that was over now. With my new degree nearly in hand, I was off for the wilds of West Africa and Peace Corps service for two years. Not looking back, the years of poverty and struggle hopefully behind me for good and only the excitement of a new life and adventures undreamed of ahead of me.

My Peace Corps group assembled in Philadelphia for 3 days of shots and orientation. Then, we were bussed down to New York for the overnight flight to Paris to connect with our flight to Burkina Faso. On the TWA flight to Paris, Suzanne sits in the seat in front of me, a striking southern beauty from Georgia, with shoulder length wavy sandy blond hair. I cannot help myself and pause at her seat as I walk by. We exchange a few words until I'm told to take my seat for takeoff.

After the flight attendant clears away the dinner trays, Suzanne gets up carrying two of those small bottles of wine and sits in the empty seat next to me. She smiles and says "*I don't like drinking alone.*"

We talk and drink wine. She had lived a year in Paris previously, but circumstances forced her back to Georgia and the dull life of a southern bell. But now she was off and not looking back either, returning to the city of lights that she loves so much. We finally fall asleep and only wake as the plane touches down at dawn. I have 16 hours before my flight to Ouagadougou; she's eager to show me her Paris.



Suzanne's Paris is centered around the oldest part of the city, where university students have debated the meaning of life and love for centuries while sitting in dark, smoky bars and cafés. We stop at her former hang out, a café where men sporting immature beards talk in hushed tones while eyeing young women dressed in alternative-culture attire; as they have at this spot since there were walls around Paris.



She takes me to her favorite museum, a small out of the way place, dark and moody, but I'm too distracted by her to notice what's there. She's beautiful, informally but fashionably dressed and speaks French with a Parisian accent; I'm a raggedy looking American, a blue collar worker with long, unkempt hair and worn blue jeans. But locals treat us like we're French lovers, perhaps because they can see me looking through her eyes at a world of infinite possibilities.

We purposely wander the streets while Suzanne points out this and that. Here is the café where they stayed up all night talking, drinking and singing French songs about the revolution. Here is the park bench with the view of the Eiffel Tower where she comes when sad or lonely. We walk along the Seine and find secluded park benches in the *Jardin de Tuileries*. That evening, as I board the plane for Ouagadougou, I hear her say again "*Please stay.*"

This morning as the taxi drives me to the airport for my flight to Dubai, we pass through the same neighborhood where Suzanne and I walked so long ago. Pedestrians and the rush hour traffic crowd the small streets, slowing our progress and increasing the toll on the meter to the pleasure of the driver. But I don't mind.



A cold rain started during the night and continues as my taxi sits in traffic. The rain echoes my melancholy mood. I look out the window of the taxi and see a couple of young lovers who stand out in the morning rush of businessmen and women, hurrying to work and hurrying in a futile attempt to keep their fine clothes dry. The lovers stand out much as Suzanne and I must have when we wandered these same streets.

I smile to myself. Once again, I was able to relive this day, this day of romance and infinite possibilities. My future lay ahead of me and so did Susanne's, everything we wanted and things unimagined waited for us.

We corresponded for a long time, longer than I expected. But as I boarded the plane for Ouagadougou, I knew that 24 hours wouldn't be enough. No doubt she found a Frenchman, a brooding romantic who liked fine wines and eclectic art, who hopefully was able to keep some of his idealism and love of life through the years, as I have no doubt that Suzanne did.



The carrousel of the *Jardin de Tuileries* across the street from my hotel.