

Bud Jennings
from *In and Out of Paris*

L'heure des deux soleils.

Two-Suns Time. That was the name he'd given the hour of the early evening when the sun, low and jaundiced through a thin screen of city haze, was reflected as an enormous sapphire on the face of La Tour Montparnasse, the only skyscraper in Paris. In a sublime, post-nap fugue, he stood at the window of his apartment, looking down at the rue de Vaugirard. On the sidewalk across the street, late shoppers, weighed down with sacks of groceries, were warmed by the twin rays of the real sun and her blue sister, but were too busy to enjoy the early-September heat. It was the annual *rentrée*, the week or so when all Parisians made their way back to the capital from the destinations that had rejuvenated, entertained, and tanned them during their August vacations. *La rentrée*. Owen's dictionary had translated it as "re-entrance; reappearance; reopening..." It was all of those things. Paris was emptying its paunch of the summer tourists—the German youths with sandals and socks, the American families looking for comfort in a McDo—and was now gorging herself with her own.

It was a festival. Beneath Owen's balcony, horns wailed, as if to announce a returning army, rather than the irritation of drivers finishing the long trek back from some Atlantic or Mediterranean resort town. He turned and scrutinized his suitcases. Kneeling in front of them, he unzipped one and pressed his face against the opening, inhaling the fragrance of Massachusetts. Among his possessions, in his apartment, in a city where he'd resided for several years, he was still an *étranger*, foreigner.

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Not that he minded. He was foreign as a kid, watching the swirl of cousins enraptured by the chase of a leather-clad ball. Sitting on the solitary side chain-link fence, the runt who took all the art classes. And when he was older, out of college and among his ilk in a city, there was still something out of focus about Owen, the only waiter at Annie B's Bistro who didn't own a single Madonna cassette.

So France offered a refuge, because there, he was a full-fledged outsider, hidden under a veil of *Américainisme*. His accent, his ideas, his shoes, distinguished and eclipsed him. If the French thought of him as a piece of hamburger gristle floating in a vat of Merlot, then all the better. He could enjoy Paris from the familiar distance of a hill. He felt about people the way he felt about the ocean: it was to be enjoyed most when it was off, over there, in view from the beach. If ever swimming, he would become anxious at the way the water would soak and weigh down his bathing suit, envelop the skin, try to work itself inside, by way of the ears or mouth.

As Owen was hanging his new thrift store acquisitions in the closet, the phone rang.

"*Allo,*" he croaked. (His first *allo* in a month.)

"*Bee-enney vooh ah Pay-ree.*" It was Laurent, with his tired, put-on American accent. The friend's challenge for Owen to speak good French.

"*Laurent, c'est bon d'entendre ta voix. J'ai reçu ta carte postale chez mes parents.*" Laurent, it's good to hear your voice. I got your postcard at my parents'.

"*Bien. Tu es arrivé aujourd'hui?*"

"This morning. I picked up a sandwich and had a long nap. I'm still in a jet lag—"

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“Your day already sounds fascinating, but I’m calling from a booth. Meet me at the Duplexe tonight.”

“The Duplexe? Not on my first night back. I’m more in the mood for, you know, something more exciting.”

“I’ll deliver the excitement. Listen, I was in Aix last weekend for Nathalie Jourdan’s summer party—too bad you missed it. There was a woman I met there. I’ve arranged a birthday present for you, Owen. A few weeks late, I know, but no matter.”

No way out. “All right. What’s the present?”

“I’ll tell you later. At 22 hours, then.” A dial tone followed.

Across the street, workmen were laying new tiles on a roof. The one in a paisley vest was belting out “*Ces Gens Là*.” Paris was an aesthetic amusement park: construction workers singing Brel; billboards in that language; Parisians who knew how to zip up a fly with panache; buildings whose cracks were older than the U.S. Constitution—all of it had a *piccante* flavor that never got old. Each day in Paris, as novel as a fresh tryst.