

## I'm A Grown Up (I Swear)

With buildings reminiscent of ancient castles—stone towers of ornate intricacy etched into existence by the Kings and Queens of old—the streets of Paris were full of inexplicable wonder and beauty. History and culture surrounded the city with an air of ultimate divinity. But the wonder that most travellers found in this city was somehow lost in these nooks, these streets not captured in photographs and postcards. The Eiffel Tower was nowhere in sight. The Louvre with its art and splendor was far from view. Searching for familiar sights or words was out of the question. English didn't exist in this world hidden from prying eyes.

And I'm still not sure how we even got there in the first place.

It's a funny thing, being lost in a place so known and so adored. Perplexing—as though the brochures and the history classes and the scenes in my favorite TV shows should have been able to lead me through the foreign streets of a city so unknown, yet so familiar. Because—*hello*, everyone knows what Paris looks like.

It was a February afternoon. The sun was hot as its rays blanketed us in its warmth, our coats just a little too heavy, our scarves a bit too constricting. It was the first day of a high school exchange program. A group of students from my school came to Paris to live with authentic French families. Emphasis on authentic—I mean, they got me to eat duck AND snail. It was legit.

But before we were able to fully immerse ourselves in the lives of these French families, we were taken on a tour of the city. We saw the Notre Dame Cathedral (and a woman in said cathedral claiming she was possessed by Satan, ready to eat us alive. I like to forget that part.) And we walked the halls of The Louvre. I even got a picture of the Mona Lisa, albeit full of the heads of the dozens of other tourists flocking to the masterpiece, but hey it's something, right?

We had walked and walked and eaten and walked some more. But we were just a bunch of whiny teenagers, after all. So we convinced our French professor to let us have a picnic break in this beautiful little park. To this day, I still can't remember the name. But he eventually agreed, giving us an hour to do with what we wished. To most, that meant exploring the cute boutiques that lined the narrow streets around us, or grabbing a baguette from a small bakery nearby.

But my friend Deb and I had other plans.

You see, our day had started pretty early. We woke up with the sun, and after having spent the entire day before trying to recover from jetlag, we weren't in

the right caffeinated state to function properly. So, we thought, let's get some coffee. What's the worst that can happen, right?

Now, we're in Paris, okay? A city known for its food and drink, especially coffee. But do my friend and I look for a cute little French café? Of course not. No, my friend remembers, on our walk full of twists and turns, that she saw a Starbucks somewhere along the way. Yes. A Starbucks. Two American teenage girls living their dream in Paris and what do they do? Get Starbucks. I know; it's something I'm still ashamed of to this day.

But this hindsight was a blessing my 17 year old self was not yet privy too. So off we go, into the heart of Paris to look for coffee that was definitely sub par in comparison to the rich and delicate coffee of the Parisians. It still hurts to think about. But regardless, we began wandering. And it was amazing. There were people laughing in the streets and girls walking with cute shopping bags in hand plastered with French words we couldn't quite decipher despite our years mastering the language. There was a beauty in the sparkle in the eyes of the locals, a curiosity in the way those aged buildings, with more history than I could have ever learned in my years studying the subject, could still stand so strikingly and majestically so many years later. I felt my heart swell up and my eyes water and my breathing accelerate, but I pushed away the juvenile tears. Because I was in Paris and I was *not* going to be one of those people who'd cry at the art and the culture, even though I'd lock myself away in the bedroom I'd begun to call home, crying over the phone to my mother at how much I had loved the city, but hated missing her.

So I followed my friend's lead, because she was so sure it was right down the street, or just another block over, or something like that because her words started making less sense and I started to get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach the longer and the farther we strayed from our designated route. We were met with beautiful cobblestones along the way, our unnecessarily large heels clacking against the ground like thousands before us. The light February wind blew our hair into our eyes, but the warm scent of fresh baked bread guided us to a destination still unknown. These hidden pathways and quaint café's remained untouched from the Paris we had always been shown, but the wonder of this secret place captivated us in a way we had never thought we would experience. Before we knew what was happening, that cute little Starbucks that we had been aiming for quickly became as elusive as the smile gracing the Mona Lisa. I should have known right then that we were screwed.

But Deb, a girl more stubborn than the dictator that once held these streets captive, would not relent. She looked and she looked and she never showed a shred of worry. At least not in a way anyone but I would notice. Because she'd do this thing where she'd start biting at her lip, looking this way and that with

slight franticness. And you could see the wince when she'd bite too hard. But only if you were looking for it.

I was.

"Look, we don't need to find a Starbucks, we can just go into anyone of these cafés. Coffee is coffee."

"But I know exactly what I want from Starbucks." She whined. I laughed, how couldn't I? She sounded like one of those obnoxious girls from a 90's movie.

"If we don't find something, we won't make it back to the group in time."

And that must have gotten to her, because she nodded solemnly and set off in a different direction. And eventually we found ourselves a quaint little café—and it was so *French*. Better than Starbucks, for sure. And we placed our order (two white hot chocolates, original right?) and pretended like we were two cute little French girls taking a day off from school, a Parisian Blair and Serena. We sat under a bright red canopy, the light fabric flapping somewhat obnoxiously in the wind. But we didn't care, hell we were in Paris, things couldn't get better. The cups in our hands burned against our palms, but we relished in it. Around us, we could hear words floating through the air, a kind of jibberish that we tried desperately to translate. You'd think four years of French class would have taught us something useful, you know? Something other than, *parlez-vous francais*, and *puis-j'aller aux toilets*? But the foreign conversations taking place around us were comforting, like a soft lullaby coaxing us into peaceful oblivion. And it was nice for a hot second before we realized that we had 15 minutes before our group was headed off to its next direction, and it had taken us at least 15 minutes to find this particular café.

So in perfect comedic fashion, we bolted. Like, ran full speed with our little backpacks bouncing against our backs like we were school children running to catch the bus. And as we ran—well, fast-walked because we did just wolf down giant hot chocolates—I got that familiar sinking feeling, that dread and that worry and that anxiousness I felt on our journey here, the same feeling that settled in my stomach as I got on the bus that was taking us to the airport as I watched my parents wave at me with tears in their eyes. The same feeling that caused a knot to form in my throat as the plane took off from Logan Airport, my first journey away from home beginning. Gone was that beauty we had gushed over on our way to the café, gone were the chapped smile, gone was the stomach-burning laughter. We barely spoke, unless you count the huffs and the wheezing as we zoomed through the streets. We were lost and we knew it.

It's kind of stupid, looking back on it, how it all hit me at once. Because I didn't realize the twinkle in the eyes of the locals was so familiar because it was the same one I saw in my youngest sister when she told me about the science test she aced, or why the pride I felt for the buildings was the same I had for

my parents who had finally, two summers before my trip, been able to buy a house again.

But as Deb and I found ourselves deeper and deeper in the winding alleys and cobblestone corridors, I finally realized how lost we really were. And it wasn't something that could be fixed with a snap of our fingers. We were in *Paris*, not Boston, or even New York City. This was something completely different. And it was in the same instance that we both realized this situation was one we were wholly unprepared for. Even after all those French tests and years fighting through high school, we weren't quite ready for the level of independence we now had, along with the consequences that came with it. We must have looked like chickens with our heads cut off, running halfway down a street only to turn right back and head in the other direction when we realized that, that flower shop was *totally* not there ten minutes ago. And if you ask Deb, she'll tell you it was my fault. I'm the one that said right instead of left, and she was the victim—all hopeless and scared and confused. But this is my story, and I plan to tell it as honestly as possible. So it was totally 110% her fault, no questions about it.

After what felt like hours, though it was only minutes, our paces both slowed, understanding and worry washed over us like the waves we watched grow smaller and smaller in our ascent into the sky days earlier. But we were just teenagers, after all, and we weren't completely sure of how to voice such complex and slightly embarrassing feelings. So instead, we fell back on the thing we were good at. Sarcasm.

“Fucking Starbucks.” We both said at the same time, and we simultaneously burst into laughter. Because, and we'd talk about this later, we were still too afraid to voice our real concerns out loud. I mean, what were we supposed to do? Call 911? Did they even have something like that in Paris, they must have I'm sure, but our minds weren't even able to form coherent thoughts. But we both laughed anyway, that same breathless laughter that put the burn right back into our stomachs.

And we didn't stop laughing, not really. But we argued, my god did we argue.

“Go this way.”

“No, go that way.”

“Do you think that guy speaks English?”

“Do you think he'll even talk to us if he does?”

“Isn't it worth a shot?”

“I don't know genius, why don't you try it out and let me know how it went?”

“You're a dick when you're stressed, did you know that?”

“No I didn't, but thanks. I'll add it to my list of achievements.”

Who said what? It's all a bit of a blur, both of us making as many jabs as we could. I do know that we wanted to pull each others hair out by the time we

made it back to the group though, our professor counting heads as we arrived. I'm still not quite sure how we made it back. Blind luck? Probably. And a happy man eating a baguette. No seriously, full on munching on a 2-foot long stick of bread. It's a thing, I guess. But I'd probably have an entirely different story if we hadn't. But the underlying concepts would undoubtedly be the same. Because I begged and begged to get my parents to let me go on this trip. Because I was mature. I was responsible. I was a senior in high school and I was 110% a trustworthy adult.

But I wasn't. Not really. Not yet. It would take months. Years. I mean, am I even an adult now? Maybe to some. Probably not to others. But it was in that moment, lost in Paris—a place I had for years considered a kind of home away from home—that I first realized how wrong I really was. But I was 17. I was young. I was stupid. I was overzealous. I was sending in my college applications and getting accepted into said colleges and I was prepping for graduation. My whole life was a dream, one I was harshly woken up from on this unseasonably warm day in February. I had spent months trying to convince myself that I was ready for an adventure like this one. And until this moment, I had been doing a bang up job. I mean, I did convince my parents I could handle the responsibility and independence that getting on that plane meant—what suckers, am I right? Because when I finally made it back to the house I'd spend the next two weeks living in, and I looked at myself in the mirror, I realized that it was just a child looking back.

I saw the girl with smudged eyeliner and braces. The girl who thought cutting her hair would make her look like Reese Witherspoon, but instead made her eyes look too big and her nose off center—and that was being nice. The girl who spent way too much time watching TV shows she had no business watching in the first place. But first, and foremost—always—just a girl.

And that really screwed with my ego, you know? Because I genuinely thought I was all grown up. I thought I was ready for the real world. But I was wrong. Because I couldn't even go on a school trip with kids I'd known since grade school without missing my parents like a *baby*. Alright, I mean getting lost in Paris is pretty traumatizing, so I'm sure that didn't help with the whole separation anxiety thing, and when I think about it, how scared we got at being lost *was* a bit melodramatic, but *still*. I didn't belong on the streets of Paris, I belonged in that upstairs bedroom, with that neon pink and orange comforter, the doll I'd had since birth resting on the pillows. And it took a while for me to reconcile that before I started thinking about the real question. Why was that such a bad thing?

Our professor barely knew we were missing, or maybe he was just ready to get this rowdy group of teenagers back to their respective homes and out of his hair—not that he had much of it left after years of stressful, know-it-all teens.

But our hearts were practically beating out of our chests when we finally found our familiar group of Americans, the constant thumping blocking out all other noise. Deb and I quickly followed the throng of tourists as we continued through Paris. We saw statues and street vendors and homeless men and women that left an ache in our hearts as they clutched their children to their chests. We gorged on flaky chocolate croissants and splashed each other at nearly every fountain we came across. But that heightened sense of anxiety never left us. We made little conversation with the kids around us, we barely made conversation with each other. And the bus ride back to Houilles—the town where our host families lived— was silent, both of us plugging in our ipods and casting the world around us out. I guess we couldn't shake that moment of paralyzing fear, even though we joke about it now.

“Remember when we got lost in Paris?” I remember asking, feet dangling off the stool in her kitchen. The room smelt of Mac N' Cheese—our appetizer, of course. Summer sun filtered in through the open windows, but the breeze that swirled about took away any and all of the uncomfortable heat.

“You mean, when *you* got us lost in Paris?” She shot back, laughing. That's always how the conversation goes. It's a joke now. It's a happy memory that captures the beginning of our friendship. We were both so naïve, so young, so wide-eyed and full of wanderlust. We didn't really understand the responsibility that went along with it.

Neither of us had ever been away from home like that, not to a foreign country at least. And we both thought it would be a carefree, innocent, throw-caution-to-the-wind experience. Which, for the most part, it was. But in those seconds, those moments when we were not only lost in the physical sense, but also lost within our own minds, we realized something was off about this whole being a grown up thing. We're grown ups now, aren't we? We thought we were then. We've grown over the years, I know that much. We make our own lunches and set up gym schedules—even though she totally ditches our 9am Saturday gym dates, like, every Saturday. We took an LNA course together and now work multiple jobs. We have credit cards and insurance payments and college loans. But we still joke about that day we got lost in Paris.

We may have thought we were grown ups, but everyone thinks they're a grown up—even my 17-year-old sister who sneaks out of the house every Saturday to go drink with her friends at bonfires. And she is certainly *not* a grown up. But here's the thing, why isn't she? Why wasn't I? Aren't grown ups allowed to be scared? To be carefree? To do stupid things and travel across the country and pay *obscene* amounts of money for college that they know they'll spend years trying to pay back?

For argument's sake, let's just say that on that trip, silly little 17 year old me wasn't a grown up. I mean, come on, lets be real here—no one else at that

stage was either. No matter how many parties they went to, no matter how many nights they spent vomiting into a friend's toilet, no matter how much they tried to immerse themselves into a world they thought made them adults, they were just as scared as not fitting into that mold as I was. As we all were, I'm sure. Or maybe I'm just a giant wuss. Whatever, I'm accepting it. Because getting lost really scared me that day, even if it only lasted a little while. I could write a novel on those 8 ½ minutes. But there's a moral to all this and it's that I wasn't ready. Not in the way I was told I should be. Not in the way I thought it was. But it taught me that, *that was okay*. Because I'm almost 20 and I'm still telling myself to grow up, to get out of bed before 2pm on weekends (and sometimes on weekdays too,) to buy groceries instead of living off of Poptarts and cranberry juice, to do laundry on a regular basis, to be more like the people I watch walking the streets in crisp suits talking on their Bluetooths.

But at the end of the day, how is it that those qualities make me irresponsible, childish, or immature? Am I really any less of a person because I still get excited over Disney movies? Am I any less of an adult because I talk to my parents on a regular basis? Am I any less of an adult when I tell my parents I'm staying over Deb's house, and she says the same to hers, giving us a chance to make stupid decisions with stupid people that we tell each other is stupid but that we love all the same? I don't think so, not anymore. But try convincing my 17-year-old self that, because she was *not* having it.

I've grown. A lot. We all have, I'm sure. And I'm not afraid of growing up like I used to be. Okay, that's a lie. I'm terrified. But I'm human and I'm still, if only for a few more months, just a teenager. And the world of cubicles and buying my own groceries and paying a mortgage are kind of awful things to think about. Like, the things of nightmares. I just know now that, that's the point. It's okay to hold onto the past, to that child inside of you. It's okay to want to call your parents and cry and get lost in Paris looking for Starbucks. Because at the end of the day we're all still growing up—kicking and screaming the whole way there.