

EUROPE

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You appear from the crowd in the Palais-Royal Metro station, and I know why I have come to Paris. I follow you to a bakery, settle in line behind you, watch you order in French. So unapproachable. Then the baker cracks a joke and you answer in English. I feel cemented to you by the cadence of your speech. When you catch my eye as I'm passing your table on the street, I say hello. The quirk at the corner of your mouth when you answer tells me you very nearly said bonjour and let me go on my way. Instead you say hi. From the beginning I am at the mercy of your whimsy.

You laugh at me when I tell you where I'm staying, a tourist hotel living off the harvest of the ignorant its crew of taxis brings from the airport. That's me, all right. You fold your newspaper: Well, you say. We have to find you a better place to stay.

Or:

I'm writing a postcard to my brother with a pen from the Kurhaus Hotel in Den Haag, where I've never been. You're two stools down at the bar, and out of the blue you ask me if Amir still tends bar at the Kurzaal restaurant. I must look as confused as I feel, because you incline your head in the direction of the pen. Oh, I say. Don't know. I've never been there. I went to Eindhoven to watch PSV, but that's as close as I've ever been to Den Haag. No idea where this pen came from. For all I know I picked it up off the nightstand of my hotel in Newark. Why, did you work there?

You actually traveled to see PSV? you ask.

This is an appropriate question, since PSV are among the more mind-numbing teams in Europe where style is concerned. I explain my mission, which is to catch at least one game involving every top-tier European team with an American player. In Holland, that meant Ajax, PSV, and Feyenoord.

Still incredulous, you say: So you came all the way to Europe to see American soccer players.

Knowing this discussion was inevitable at some point, I have constructed a rationale. It's like any other thematic itinerary, I argue. Castles or museums or World War II memorials. Just a framework, a means to get to different cities and see what they have to offer. You're laughing, not just at the argument but at the fact that I went to the trouble of putting it together.

I like the Dutch hotel pen bit, but Paris is the city for you. Your apartment is a minor miracle, a block from the Comedie Francaise, all marble and mirrors on the inside. You lucked into it through a friend, and also because construction of a new Metro line has left a large crack in the ceiling, so it's priced more like a suburban high-rise than like the Palais-Royal showplace it is.

You came to Europe to go to grad school. You speak at least a few useful phrases of every language between the Volga and the Loire. You make your living translating, and are offered more work than you can accept. Men follow you. Women befriend and then are intimidated by you. You have six tattoos.

Any of these things could be true of me. None of them are.

My turn. I'm going to keep the soccer-tour bit even though there aren't any Americans in the French Ligue 1, which means I don't have any good reason to go to Paris. But who needs a good reason to go to Paris?

The point comes at which life must be torn up by the roots. But aren't we all a little tired of this idea that we will find ourselves—find romance, renewal, fulfillment—in Europe? I am, and the whole trip was my idea. I have invented you, now I will invent myself too: Maybe something has failed—a business, a marriage—and I'm disguising a mid-life crisis with a veneer of cultural longing (although the footy itinerary makes it a very thin veneer). Or maybe I just wanted to go to Europe. Maybe I knew I would find you. Maybe I was hoping I would.

I came to Europe for a convention, and stayed for a couple of weeks to see the sights. I came to Europe on the pilgrimage of the American soccer fan. I came to Europe because I was unexpectedly relieved of personal and career responsibilities. I came to Europe because I had a pile of frequent-flyer miles. I came to Europe because it was the last thing I could figure out to do, because I was hoping that distance would bring perspective. I came to Europe so I could postpone dealing with my failures.

At least that last one has worked. Now that I've met you, I can wallow in the knowledge that sometime soon you will be one more part of my life that has ended. Everything else feels comfortably distant.

Or let's nail this down a little, and say that I have a troubled marriage, or a remembered marriage. Plus an unfulfilling job, and friends who offer useful advice such as: Hey, what happens in Europe stays in Europe.

Or I'm just lost, and going someplace unfamiliar because I don't appear to be able to locate myself in the places I already know. Which is another way of saying that I was hoping you existed, and that I would find you.

In any case, I am here and away from all of it: the brittle and drunken cheer of my neighbor whose husband has escaped their failing marriage by re-enlisting in the Army and heading to Iraq; the unmanageable in-between-ness of my own life, and love, and work. I have come to Europe convinced that Europe will change me, that I will find something there—here—to catalyze the elements of myself that lie inert in the America of my mind. Instead I have found you, and the catalysis begun is not the one I imagined.

You never do find me a place to stay, except insofar as I wake up the next morning with a noseful of your hair and the belated realization that sometime during the night we began breathing together. I get up and go into the kitchen, thinking about coffee. I'd go and get some, but I don't know where you keep your key, so I dig around in the cabinets and find beans in the freezer. I hope the sound of the grinder doesn't wake you up; it has become irrationally important to me that I be able to bring you coffee in bed.

Mug in hand, I pause in the doorway, watching you sleep. You're on your right side, arms curled, legs slightly scissored as if you've just finished a dream about running. There's no way you could have slept through the grinder, I think. You're faking, and it's sweet. I crouch next to the bed—there's no frame—and say Hey. Morning. Want some coffee?

You stir, and smile at the sight of the mug. I decide to believe you really were asleep. You sit up and take the coffee. Merci, you say.

When I realize you're teasing me, I get a little flutter in my chest.

By the end of the day, you've given me a nickname: Can't Read, from what my name would sort of mean in Latin. When I tell you it's actually Greek and means leader of men, you revise the moniker to Can't Read the Great. But mostly you just call me Can't. I am wonderstruck at the way we are falling together. You have to work, so I wander out to see the city. You give me your key and tell me to make a copy. After dinner we go to your local bar and sit around tallying up the number of times the Scots playing darts call each other cunt. There's a gypsy playing the violin outside, so beautifully that I assume he's synced to a speaker (bow-syncing?) until you tell me he's actually that good. Every so often he takes a break and comes in for a drink. I feel like I might burst.

In the night, I follow the contours of your body. You lead me to morning.

And again.

And again.

I have a trip scheduled that I've planned since I was maybe fifteen, a commando raid of English soccer stadiums. When I tell you about it, I am anticipating that we will go through the motions of wishing each other well. Instead you look up from the oven—you're baking bread, and previous loaves have emerged misshapen and suspicious—and say Are you coming back here?

Eight days, four Premier League matches: Blackburn-Southampton, Fulham-Liverpool, Manchester City-Crystal Palace, and Manchester United-Everton. It should be one of the best weeks of my life, but I'm miserable. The first Saturday, Blackburn keeper Brad Friedel shuts out Southampton—who doesn't, but still, I'm finally in England watching a game—and all I can think of is you. I almost leave the stadium at halftime to buy a cellphone and call you. Wednesday is an FA Cup match between Fulham and 'Pool. Brian McBride scores on an insane flying volley for Fulham to tie the game in the 82nd minute, and I am wishing I was somewhere else. The following Saturday, after two days wandering around London on a morose bender, I get on a train to Manchester. City beats Palace, Claudio Reyna is an absolute terror on the right side of midfield, and I'm so bombed by the end of the game that I take a taxi downtown and spend hours afterward walking back and forth across the Blackfriars Bridge, consumed with the need to know whether you'd have come with me if I'd asked. The sun comes up with me freezing my ass off in Parsonage Gardens. I get in another taxi, head for Old Trafford, and watch ManU lose 2-0, on a penalty and a close-range header that no keeper in the world would have stopped but that nevertheless will set Tim Howard up for the next chapter in his ongoing crucifixion by the English newspapers.

There was a time in my life—say, a month ago—when I would have gone to the pubs and defended Tim Howard's honor and talent to the utmost of my strength and tolerance for alcohol. Today I can't get back to London too soon, and the four purgatorial hours on the Eurostar between London and Paris Nord are just long enough that I'm nearly able to convince myself that you won't be there. I ride the Metro sitting very still because I'm not

sure what will happen if I start to move. I get off the Metro and walk to your apartment, concentrating on breathing. Hand on the doorknob, feet on the stairs.

Then there you are, backlit as you open the door and pause, looking at me, before saying Hey, Can't. I am without words. I wake up early and lie in the dark watching the arrival of dawn make you real again.

I'm sitting on a balcony outside the apartment of an acquaintance of yours from the Florence office of the company that pays you to translate marketing materials. The day is warm. I watch people wander up and down the street, hear the drift of their speech. You're inside doing something mysterious. The air smells like bread and the river. Soon we will part.

It is not enough for me to have been an interlude in your life. I will burn for you as long as there is something in me to burn. Even when I am home, and reassembling this life I have deliberately fragmented, I will burn.

From Florence we drive to La Spezia, where a friend of mine has set me—set us—up with a place to stay. Our host operates a bar called Uncle Hank's, after Bukowski. The name puts me in mind of other American writers whose work found its first devoted readership in Europe. I imagine a Philip K. Dick bar, festooned with garish paperback covers and populated by fierce paranoids with secret longings for salvation. At Uncle Hank's we drink, and when we are all drunk our host reaches under the bar and shows us a leatherbound scrapbook of Fascist memorabilia. Mussolini, he says with reverence. Only true Italian saint.

Settled in our room, I am furious and embarrassed that my one chance to show you a place you've never been has come to this. You put a hand on my arm and say Can't.

That's all it takes. How do you know to do this?

My enthusiasm for soccer is either infectious or amusing. You say you'll come to Germany for the Bundesliga portion of the Grand Footy Tour. I have tickets for Hannover 96 and Bayer Leverkusen, but Landon Donovan has left Leverkusen to go home to California, and I actually hear myself say So how about we skip this soccer thing and just go to Berlin?

You fly into a rage before stomping out. I don't understand. I sit up all night puzzling out the nature of my error and holding at bay a swelling sense of what I can only call bereavement. Switching tactics, I adopt a cyni-

cal perspective. I'm still in Paris, it's been fun, and at least for the moment I have a better place to stay than the tourist hotel from which you rescued me lo these many emotional ages ago.

I was never very good at being a cynic, and on this night my capacity for self-deception fails me as well. You're angry because I have crossed a boundary; by abandoning soccer I have made an overture that you find inappropriate and cannot accept. I start thinking that you've left to give me a chance to clear out, and I start to do exactly that. Then I have second thoughts. I want to be sure. I spend the night on the couch turning the pages of a Berlin guidebook, sitting up every time a car door shuts outside in the street. I channel my thoughts in directions other than the question of where you are. They channel themselves back. At some point I fall asleep.

In the morning you're there again, and you want to go to Berlin with me. Never has being completely wrong felt so good. I feel like I've won something precious beyond reckoning yet burdened with a sweet and irresistible curse.

There's a place in Berlin, I don't know where, one of the surviving prewar neighborhoods that feel like time-traveling after a day spent among postwar monoliths. Some friend of yours once worked there, or set the place on fire, or something like that. Everywhere we go, there's some friend of yours who has done something outrageous and picaresque. We're in a bar called Callaloo. I wondered when I saw it why all the bars I'd seen in Berlin were named after somewhere else, or something that only exists somewhere else. What I wanted was a biergarten named Wiener Blut, with an oompah band in the background and clones of the St. Pauli girl sashaying around with pewter-lidded steins. Just to know that a place like that existed, that the Germany I have read about still persists in the world.

I think you would die laughing if I told you this. Instead I make a joke out of it, and you don't laugh, so now I'm convinced that you're about to tell me you're going back to Paris, and maybe I should just travel on myself. I've been preparing myself for this since the moment you said hi instead of bonjour. Obviously it has to happen. We aren't going to grow old together. We aren't going to weed a garden, or worry about our children's grades, or look at paint chips in the hardware store. I have indulged in all of these fantasies—also that you will appear in the airport terminal, bags packed, just as I'm about to begin the hours of trans-Atlantic emptiness before landing in the cold asphalt April of Newark. The size of America, after these days

and weeks of you, will seem to me like a great emptiness that I could eat and eat and never fill.

In another daydream, you appear at some coffeehouse in Michigan that I mentioned to you once, I think on the train to Florence. I'm slouching over a newspaper and your voice comes to me like, well, a dream. Probably behind the counter there's a movie orchestra, conductor poised for the moment we make eye contact; that's how fatuous I get when I start imagining things that will never happen.

I'm gnawing over all of this, here in Berlin, and you look up from the book you're reading and say—with that little lift of one eyebrow, that slight cock of the head—What's on your mind?

You are dividing me.

This is the part of it that I can't get my head around. All the afternoons we spend sitting in parks watching old women feed pigeons, all the nights we spend drinking and throwing darts, all the mornings when the smells of coffee and awakening life in the street make me glad to be alive and with you—none of it has to happen in Europe.

Except it does.

After Berlin, we head east. In Petersburg, you tell me, you once sold a pair of Levi's to a teenager who also wanted your Boston Celtics T-shirt. It's hard for me to envision you wearing a Celtics T-shirt, and I can't pursue the train of thought very far without wondering who gave it to you. I think that at first I wanted to know everything about you; now we walk away from the river along Literyny Prospekt and at every alley or courtyard I think: it might have happened there. You don't elaborate, and I don't ask. Perhaps the details curdle the story. Maybe you made it all up. I don't care. Walking with you is enough for now. It's later, lying awake after the long striving of our bodies against each other, that I realize I should be haunted by the ghosts of Dostoevsky and Pushkin and Akhmatova—instead I am haunted by the knowledge that you have been here before. You will always have a Petersburg that does not include me. Your Petersburg will never be my Petersburg.

On the way back, Krakow. We tour the Wieliczka salt mine. Standing in the cathedral there, beneath light falling from chandeliers made of salt, I tell you there's a salt mine under Detroit, too. You point at a sculpture of the Virgin Mary: Do they have one of those, Can't?

It couldn't be that you're winking, but none of this can be, can it?

The narrowing from your hips to your waist fills me with an ache that only my hands on your skin can heal. I would kiss the corners of your eyes and not stop for an earthquake. For the clutch of your fingers on my hips I would betray my oldest friend. You are translating advertising copy at the kitchen table and it is all I can do not to tear the pen from your hand, break your laptop over my knee, savage your body, peel you back and climb inside and rest.

You sense me looking at you. With the merest tilt of your head, you look up and say, Colloquialism's a bitch.

So why didn't you answer me in French? I ask one night

You followed me all the way from the train station, you say. I figured I might as well find out what you were all about.

Have you?

We're holding hands on the train from Berlin back to Paris. There's a book open on your lap, and every once in a while you read one of the poems to me, translating as you go. I close my eyes and listen. In everything you say I hear an echo of another line of poetry that stuck in my head a long time ago:

Love that well which thou must leave ere long.

On this stretch of track, the forest grows close. Shadows stipple your face. I will hold this memory of you. Or it will hold me.