

# The unforgettable desire to travel to france as the dream country

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It's an easy question to answer: "where would you go if given the chance to travel anywhere in the world?" My answer was always the same. "Away. Anywhere but here." I have lived a life more privileged than most, and for that I am grateful to whatever cosmic coin-toss determined how my story would play out, but frankly, for most of that life I was bored. And I am bored. This boredom drove me up the walls as a child, pushed me into rebellion and complicity in my adolescence, and leaves me stagnant and lonely as I foray into adulthood. There was a time, not long ago at all, where I wasn't bored or complicit or lonely—well, not really a time, but a place, and so the definitive answer to the burning question at hand goes as such: If I were given a ticket to any place in the world, if I could drop all of my responsibilities and disappear for a time, I would go back to France.

I have lived most of my life in books, novels, short stories, essay collections, memoirs, it never really mattered much. It was, for me like for most avid readers, the easiest form of escapism within my my reach that didn't involve becoming addicted to some mind altering substance. I enjoyed reading about places the most, especially those I felt connected to, be it through familial ties or convention alone. France was the focus of my ever-present wanderlust. It was the perfect place—not that I'd ever been—an extended dreamscape of history, both personal and impersonal. My family came from France not too long before my generation. My grandfather, the father of my mother, was born in Provence and spent the majority of his life studying Theology in Paris. He moved to the States in hopes of producing a more comfortable life for my mother and her sisters, and that he did.

Throughout my life I studied French history, language, architecture and culture in an attempt to bring myself closer, metaphorically, to France.

The first thing I reminder of my ancestral home is the sprawling, seemingly endless expanses of still and timeless greens and blues and violets. The hills and motionless beaches seem without origin; as if they had existed before the dawn of time and will remain extant into eternity.

In my youth I never saw pictures of France, seldom heard anyone mention it. I knew my mother's father had come from France, though that was the extent of my affiliation. The rest had been packed away into a hinterland of vague, second-hand memories passed down from my mother and my aunts.

The summer following my senior year of high school, that experience, the inimitable painting my maternal family and years of obsession had etched in my mind became real. My eldest brother and I decided—in a spontaneous fit of adventurousness—to travel to France. We packed our bags, drove to IAH, and, as if by magic, we were on the first flight to Naples. Our trip had to begin in Italy, being that it was already so late into the tourist season and there were no direct flights to Paris that hadn't already been impossibly overbooked. Perhaps we could have been more prepared, but if I'm being completely frank, going to Paris seemed such a far fetched, dreamed-up luxury—an act of hubris almost—that we had not wanted to jinx ourselves by purchasing anything beforehand.

Once in Naples, after enjoying a bit of the Neapolitan culture, I hailed a cab to Napoli Centrale to purchase two direttissimo tickets to Paris. Being the

only one in the group who spoke decent enough Italian, it was my job to liaise for my brother and the natives. It would be the same in France.

I didn't bother much to stare at the many stations along our journey up the coast. The sea itself came unannounced. I knew I would see it eventually, though I guess part of the magic lay in not knowing exactly when it would appear, or whether, not being as striking as I thought it would be, it would come and go without me noticing at all. Yet, when I saw it, as shattered and obstructed as it was, the view was perhaps the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. It's not like I had never seen a beach before, there are plenty in the States, but this was different. This kind of expanse had a timeless magnitude to it that was hitherto unknown to me. This was a worldly beach at hand's reach. I could feel the salt water in my blood. It was like passing a field of dreams, waving hello to a land that was no longer mine, and perhaps never had been and never would be, but that felt like home.

When we arrived in Paris it was eight o'clock at night, it was raining and we had no hotel reservations, but I was filled with a joy that made me feel that the situation could not turn against me. I hailed my second cab that day and asked the driver to take us to the best hotel he knew of. When we arrived I stepped out, told the cabbie not to turn his engine off, and went inside to ask what I assumed would be a rather perfunctory question about vacancies. The answer surprised me. Do you have any vacancies? Why, of course we do, monsieur. Any with a view? Naturally. Within fifteen minutes I was sitting on the most perfect little balcony, enjoying the most perfect late-night meal, peering out at perhaps the most perfect city I had ever seen. I couldn't think,

I couldn't feel. All I could do was enjoy myself. As any bookish person would know, thinking comes after, never before or during. So I sat and I enjoyed and for the first time in a very long time, I felt content.

We didn't stay long in France, my brother and I. We both had jobs and responsibilities and other terribly jejune things to return to. I took in as much as possible, saw every sight I could think of seeing, spoke with every person I could convince to parlay with me. I imbibed the culture as voraciously as any human could. On my last night, I sat on our tiny balcony, staring out at it all, feeling like a helpless spectator in a world that would never truly be mine, pressing my hands against the wrought iron railing just outside the French-doors of our room, all I could think of was: This is it. There it is. I leave tomorrow. I wanted to put my hands over my eyes. This was the center of the universe, the most perfect place in the world! I could want for nothing more for the rest of my days.

When we left I remember wanting to cry, but thinking how childish that would be. And while childishness is as human as any sin could be, I couldn't help but fault myself for it. There are people dying of starvation on the other side of the world, people living in poverty not one-hundred miles from my house, and this makes me want to cry? Never in my life have I been served such a huge portion of joy and been left feeling so empty. I didn't even know what I was supposed to feel. What was I supposed to do with so much emotion? What was I supposed to do with the experience? These are the questions I asked myself, rather than just being glad I had the experience, as if the words, the remembrances could provide anything above the real thing.

The mild anxiety, the *légère angoisse*, of leaving something I had come to love so much, with such all-consuming passion, was one of the most painful things I had ever done at the time, and to this day I regret getting on that plane to return to Texas. So, the reason I say that I would spend that one magical ticket on a trip I have already experienced, is so that I can neglect the return ticket in pocket, so I can tear it up, throw it away, and forget that there is anywhere else for me to be but there, my sweet, perfect Paris.