

Enduring Paris

How the tragedy at Charlie Hebdo made me finally confront my feelings about a decade-old armed robbery and love the city all the more.

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8 min read

I first saw a gunman in Paris the morning of Thanksgiving 2005. My husband, then boyfriend, and I had an early flight home to Seattle and we'd sleepily gathered all of our things, locked the door of our room at the Hotel St. Christophe, and stood for a moment waiting for the elevator. Except the elevator was tiny and we weren't sure it would hold us and our luggage. And we were in a hurry. So we took the stairs down the two or three flights, chatting and planning the taxi. That decision may have saved our lives.

I sent Clayton to the waiting area to wait with our things while I checked us out (he didn't speak French and I'm bossy about travel details). And I stood about 20 feet away from the reception desk waiting patiently while the clerk talked with a man wearing a silver motorcycle helmet, full face shield down. I was that out of it. It had been that kind of trip.

Artists in Paris

We'd arrived in Paris five days earlier. It was my second visit; the first time I'd been sixteen and loose on the city while ostensibly under the care of a youth group. It was Clayton's first time in Paris and we were there to celebrate his graduation—he'd earned a BFA in painting and photography and we were ready for that classic artistic pilgrimage.

The train from the airport was unreliable because of the [banlieue riots](#) that were just ending. We didn't see any cars lit on fire or any police in riot gear. Like most tourists, my Paris consisted entirely of the arrondissements (and only five or six of those really registered with me) and I felt safe. When our taxi driver got in a verbal argument with a garbage truck that resulted in all parties (and a few bystanders) exiting their vehicles and bobbing at the waist while yelling (like chickens), I was delighted. I might have been carrying around some of my naiveté from the last trip, but nothing was going to shake my joy at finally being in Paris with the man I loved.

At sixteen, I'd visited Paris with an American friend, Morgan, and a Catholic youth group called Taize. It was a break from our year of foreign exchange in Poland. I had my passport in my pocket and an unlimited Métro card and I was ready to take on the world. We kissed Jim Morrison's grave in Père Lachaise. We toured the Louvre. We ate Haagen-Dazs on the Champs Élysées and a sandwich seller proposed to me. Then we had a brush with the police when the Métro ticket machine devoured Morgan's pass and she jumped the turnstile, but I talked us out of that in my rapidly improving French. For one moment I thought I could stay in Paris forever and everything would be perfect. But the bus back to Poland waited and I was a good little girl, so all of my love for Paris gestated for eleven more years until Clayton and I returned.

And in 2005 it felt like we were taking on the world again. We were horribly jetlagged so we wandered the banks of the Seine at ungodly hours as late night revelers wrapped up their parties. It was freezing and I wore everything I'd brought all at once. We walked throughout the day and we walked throughout the night. One morning before dawn I tried to walk us from the Latin Quarter to Sacré-Coeur, but Clayton, who is much more cautious than I, suggested we turn around when he saw we were completely alone on the street (and began to suspect I had no idea how far Monmartre really was). It was a perfect trip.

When we finally got to Montmartre (via the Métro), there were far too many young men hanging from doorways with nothing better to do than mutter “Boro” at us for me to feel truly safe. I think they were asking for cigarettes, I never truly understood. But we walked on and let the feeling pass.

A Near Mugging

At the base of the final hill leading to Sacré-Coeur we encountered a group of Nigerians who really wanted to separate Clayton from me. I don't think it was obvious that he was carrying a camera, but the jetlag and general discombobulation of his first trip abroad was starting to show on his face. They chatted with him in English trying to get him to put his finger in a string as I dragged him up the hill. I finally barked at them in French and got them to go away. After a few minutes appreciating the view at the top I wanted to take the side stairs down. Clayton did not. He knew they'd be waiting for us at the bottom of the hill, which they were. We got away again. Clayton's takeaways were that we were nearly mugged and that I wasn't very good at listening to his instincts. Mine were that we'd avoided getting mugged thanks to my French and my bullheadedness. But even that didn't ruin our trip or our general feeling about how wonderful Paris is.

The rest of our trip was fantastic. Clayton joked with a library security guard who couldn't find all of the pockets in his camera bag to search. We walked to the Rodin Museum and got deliciously lost on the way back. We ate pains au chocolat and drank cafés crème in the basement of our hotel. We learned how to order (dessert comes after) and we sat with the locals in the Jardin du Luxembourg.

So on that morning when we were leaving Paris, the morning the hotel was being robbed, we were already deeply in love with the city and the people.

The Armed Robbery

When the man in the motorcycle mask came my way and grabbed my arm, I didn't register what was happening. I didn't look back to see what was happening to Clayton. I didn't know until much later that a much smaller masked person had him by the elbow and a gun to his ribs. I let the man lead me to the back room, even though my mother told me never to let someone take you to a secondary location. I did not know that Clayton and his captor were right behind me until we got to that back room and saw the woman who had served us breakfast every day seated on the floor. I was so relieved she was unharmed because I thought it meant we would be too. I heard a shout as we hostages stood there, not knowing what to do. It wasn't until another woman from the kitchen came up and asked us what was going on that we felt free to leave. All of this took place over a few minutes but it could have been hours. That sounds like a cliché until you've been there.

We've pieced together what happened between our seclusion in the back room and the arrival of the police. There must have only been two robbers because while they took us to the back, the desk clerk ran out the front. He must have taken the deposit with him, because when the robbers realized he was gone, they got the hell out of there. He also must have called the police, because we did not.

That morning we sat in the waiting area with our luggage as the police arrived. How many uniformed officers showed up in that first little white van? Five, maybe six. They were tiny but they took it all very seriously. I told our story beside Clayton who was very quiet and very gray-faced. Then they asked me to interpret for him and when he said gun (one of many words I never learned in high school French class), one of the uniformed officers ran to that white van and came back with an armload of what must have been automatic weapons. Such a small man, so many guns; it was like a

scene out of *The Pink Panther*. Except my lover had just been held at gunpoint and we had just been (albeit briefly) hostages.

The Pink Panther turned to 36 *Quai des Orfèvres* as we waited for the detectives to show up. We still had a plane to catch, as I kept telling everyone. The hotel owner sat with us as we waited. So kind, so apologetic. When two detectives finally showed up—a Daniel Auteuil type in a black leather coat and a Vincent Cassel type in silver sneakers, we told our story again. We still could not leave. We were waiting for one more boss to whom we needed to tell our story. That final retelling was brief and anticlimactic. They took our names and we were ready to go. Someone comped us a taxi and we sat in silence all the way to Charles de Gaulle.

At the airport, Clayton smoked a thousand cigarettes outside while I tried to get our VAT refund. Me ever the bossy traveler, him actually experiencing what had just happened to us. When armed police started clearing that wing of the airport due to some threat or other, I joined Clayton on the sidewalk and finally lost it, shouting, “That’s it, I’m done.” We made our plane, which was practically empty. And we barely spoke during either of the flights it took to get home. I think Clayton was still in shock. It was weeks before I could finally cry.

The thing is, after all of that, we still loved Paris and couldn’t wait to get back. We haven’t had the funds or have been exploring other places, but Paris still sits at the top of places we want to be (I secretly think we’re afraid if we go, we’ll never leave). We watch *Midnight in Paris* and *Avenue Montaigne*. Although anymore I steer away from *Le Cercle Rouge* or *La Haine*.

The Attack at Charlie Hebdo

The second time I saw a gunman in Paris was as we watched the news unfold this past week about the assassinations at Charlie Hebdo and the hostage situation at the supermarket. Watching the television, I remembered the French police and how seriously they had taken what happened to us. I thought about that woman’s “choice” to let the killers in. I did not think about how little I had been able to think when that man was taking me to the back of the hotel. What was happening in our news feeds and on our screens was real life 5,000 miles away. Though Clayton and I never had to hear shots fired or watch anyone be injured or killed, I hoped it felt as unreal to those hostages as it had to us.

I don’t know about the politics or what happens next. I believe in free speech. I believe in the courage of expression. Mostly, though, I believe in Paris and in Parisians. Violence is not limited to big cities. Yesterday a [spree killer in my tiny hometown](#) of Moscow, Idaho murdered three people. But I hate to say it’s part of the human condition.

What I believe is human is our ability to feel and to love and to create extraordinary things from terrible situations. It’s what we do as artists. And for me, Paris is the epicenter of art—a city filled with people who can take the horrible events of the past few days and turn them into something greater. Something that transforms us all.

It’s been more than ten years since the day we were part of that armed robbery, and I haven’t been able to write about it until now. Only a few people have ever even heard this story.

I will always love Paris, and I hope she and her citizens recover faster than I did. Today I mourn with her, but I am confident that in the long run she’ll be an example to all of us of how to reconnect with our humanity after being victimized by violence.