



# Midnight in Paris

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## Midnight in Paris

To the right of the Mona Lisa's smile, Jeff Godfrey noticed another, just as enigmatic curl of lips.

The woman might have been a Louvre exhibit herself she was so poised. A statue, still as Greek marble. Her eyes brushstroke green as if Degas had picked her as canvas.

Her smile grew wider. She nodded in Jeff's direction.

Stricken, he looked around for someone else who would fit the space where her eyes were fixed.

No. All eyes in the tourist line were upon the guide who talked low and dull of DaVinci and the history of a smile.

"Me?" Jeff mouthed as he picked himself out with a finger.

The stranger nodded.

He repeated the question.

The strange woman nodded again.

Confused, Jeff ambled forward to stand before the exhibit woman.

She gave him a compass look, touching the geography of his body North, South, East and West with her green eyes.

"Yes," she said, as though a question had been asked and she had answered.

"Yes?"

"I was right."

"Right? About what?"

"You."

"Me?"

She nodded. "You don't belong here. Not here in this museum, no."

Jeff checked the line standing before Mona Lisa's smile.

They were short and fat, tall and thin, wide and not-so-wide, but all had a common trait. Around their short or fat, wide or not so wide

wrists they wore the yellow band of the visitor. The mark of the tourist.

As did he.

Could this woman be a Louvre detective of some sort? A police officer looking for possible criminals hiding under cover of art? Had she mistaken him for some other, less baffled and more dangerous person?

He held his wrist up. "I think you may be confused. I bought a ticket, I'm with that—"

"You don't understand, not yet," she said.

"You're right about that," he said.

"You will though, given enough time. Now tell me, why are you here?"

Jeff shrugged. "To see Paris, to visit the Louvre, Notre Dame, to—"

"This," she said her eyes tracing the inside of the museum, "is not Paris. This is the insect trapped in amber. A picture taken to remember a moment in time. Out there is where you will find what you seek."

Jeff glanced to where he'd been stood only moments before.

The Mona Lisa painting looked back at him, still as enigmatic as ever.

"Seek?" Jeff said, his voice confused.

The strange woman lay a hand upon his shoulder and turned him away from the painted and enigmatic smile and toward her own, just as enigmatic

"You come here to find friends, do you not?"

"Friends, what do you—"

"Kindred spirits, no? You weren't drawn here to stand in lines and hear what this city is or has been, were you now? Not here to see only the postcard picture, but something more." She pulled him round, her hand crooked and pointing beyond the walls of the museum to the day beyond. She leaned close to his ear.

"You've come to see ghosts and poets," she whispered.

Her voice was a cool summer breeze and a winter chill at the same time.

Jeff shivered. He wasn't sure why he was here exactly. One morning he'd woken and the idea had been there in his head. Time to break a rut, he supposed, see something else of life, *somewhere* else. One city had been the same as another to him, but Paris was closest. But this idea of ghosts and poets, what did she mean by that?

"Ghosts and poets?" he repeated.

She smiled and it was as if Venus had turned after a thousand years to greet him.

"You'll know soon enough," she said, "now close your eyes?"

"Close my eyes, why should I close my eyes?"

She reached to touch his lids, but did not touch.

"Close them, for a moment, when you open them again everything will be clear. You will see why you came here."

Jeff swallowed hard. Could he trust this woman, this strange and mystifying creature who talked of friends, ghosts and poets in the same

breath? What if she were a thief, a very odd thief, who had picked him from the line like the weak lamb hunted by the wolf?

"I'm not—"

"Hush," she said, "close your eyes, trust me."

"But—"

"Hush. If you do not close your eyes then you will never know what you missed, will you?"

"But..." he said, but there was something about the woman that he trusted. A feeling, yes, but something more, as if he was where he should be at that moment in time. Comfortable, even. And what harm would it do to close his eyes for a moment? Just a moment and then when he opened them she would probably be there holding a pamphlet or some other tourist-trap trinket.

Jeff closed his eyes.

There was little time behind the lids, nothing that could be measured, no clock that ticked. It was a moment too long and not long enough.

Jeff opened his eyes.



The Louvre was gone and with it the short and tall, thin and wide tourists he'd followed the last few days. Gone the smile of two women; one trapped in canvas, the other her own canvas.

He found himself on a narrow street, where narrow shops were shuttered tight against the night.

The night!

Jerking his head upward, Jeff took in the sky.

The stars dotted the deep blackness directly above, haloed at the edges by the glow of street lamps. Beneath those stars Paris hummed with the nocturnal music of faraway cars and the chatter of people.

Panicked, Jeff turned and turned again, looking for something familiar in his surroundings. Where am I? Where do I go from here, he wondered? How did I—?

A new music echoed along the narrow street. At once sounding like footsteps and then only a soft padding shuffle.

Jeff froze.

A shadow as long as any thrown beneath the lamp posts, emerged from the deeper shadows at the edge of the street.

His heart beating out a rhythm that he was unused to, Jeff watched as the shadow grew.

Jesus! Have I been drugged, he thought? Is that what that woman did to me? Dope me up so that she could lure me out here to God knows where, with no language to shout for help! Only a voice that might not be understood?

The shadow became a shape, became a creature, a cat.

Jeff let out a long and relieved sigh.

Just a cat, nothing more. There was no harm in a cat.

The cat slinked and purred its way along the street, oblivious of human interruption, a master of the world it inhabited. Neither cautious nor too brave. Soon it reached the ground before Jeff.

Heart returning to something less than a rapid gunfire, he stooped to greet the new stranger. A cat was better than a human any day when it came to relief. You could trust a cat not to drug you and then drop you off in the middle of a city you didn't know.

"I don't suppose you could tell me how to get back to my hotel, could you?" he said as he stroked the cat's fur. "It's in Saint Germain Des Pres, the Maxim Quartier Latin Hotel. Do you know it little kitty?" His voice was as awkward as his position. If only he'd learned some of the local language before this trip. Of course, it wouldn't matter to the cat.

The cat looked up at him with green and inquisitive eyes.

"Don't have a clue, do you?" Jeff said. "Well that makes two of us."

The cat purred.

He continued his stroke as he searched again the narrow and empty street for clues. How far from here would it be to get to there? Was it

miles, was it the turn of a corner? And how had he got here in the first place?

You couldn't just close your eyes and wish yourself away from one place to another. There was no Dorothy heel-click in the real world that would make such travel possible. Then it had to be a drug of some sort? But how had the woman given him that drug? By touch? Had she transferred some magic dust when she turned him away from the tourist line and toward her smile?

And what of the poets and ghosts? What did she mean by that?

Jeff stroked one last time, his mind foggy but clearing.

Poets and ghosts, just a joke, surely. He wanted bed and pillow, sleep and rest, not poets and ghosts. He had not come here to be lost on the streets with no language or map to guide him.

There had to be a way out.

But which way?

North, South, East and West, which was which? And which way did he start walking in hopes of finding someone who would be sympathetic to his lack of language?

Forward?

Into a city he did not know, a people who might not understand him, in the uncertain direction of every lost and wandering soul?

There was nothing else for it. He had to start walking now or stay here the rest of the night hoping to be found by a sympathetic stranger.

“Good bye kitty,” Jeff said as he rose up and pointed himself toward the end of the narrow street.

Now or never, he thought.

It would be never.

The cat tore off toward the shadows from which it had emerged. It took a leap into that darkness, but did not disappear. It's two green eyes looked out from the black, hovering it seemed six feet off the ground.

Jeff caught a breath, stopped his foot from stepping and stared, wide-eyed at what had happened.

Drugs, yes, that's what it is. I'm hallucinating that's it. No other possible explanation.

Except...

A new shadow, a new shape emerged and it was a woman. The woman from the Louvre who'd tricked him. The very same, and here she was on the street.

She glided, soundless along the road. Perched like a parrot on her shoulder was the dark inkblot of the cat, its green eyes afire.

"You made it, I see," she said as she came to a stop before him.

"Made it? Where exactly am I, and how did I get here? Did you bring me here?" Jeff said.

'You brought yourself.'

Jeff shook his head. "Nope, didn't. Don't even know where I am. Maybe you can start with that and tell me where I am exactly?"

"Where you should be."

"Oh, well, that clears everything up, yes, fine. I'm where I should be, now that's as clear as can be." Jeff's sigh was no longer one of relief, but frustration. He held his palms out, almost pleading. "Could you please tell me what's going on here? Better yet, would you tell me how to get back to my hotel?"

She smiled, that Greek statue smile and it was as if she had been carved a thousand years earlier to wait for this very moment. It was the smile of a woman who knew deep and beautiful secrets that she might never speak.

"What is it? Why are you smiling?" Jeff said.

The strange woman cocked her head, the smile now one of inquisition rather than pleasure.

"You don't see yet, do you?"

"See what? What is it I'm supposed to see?"

"Why you came here to this city."

Jeff closed his eyes and tried to count to ten, but could make it only to four.

"I've already told you I came here to visit the sights, to take in the city and—"

"No," she said, wagging her head. Beside her the parrot-like cat twisted its head toward Jeff and gave him a disapproving look.

"No? What do you mean, no? All I want is to get back to my hotel, to forget any of this craziness happened. I want to go home."

The woman held out her long statue marbled hand.

Jeff looked at it with suspicion.

"What now?" he said.

"You want to go home, do you not?"

"Well of course I do, that's what I've been—"

"Then take my hand."

Jeff reached then pulled back his hand. He'd trusted her once and ended up in the middle of nowhere. Why should he trust her again? What if he didn't take her hand? Would he be left out here alone and wondering how to get home?

"No tricks?" he said.



She smiled. "Take my hand and I'll take you home."

He clasped his hand into hers.

"You promise? No more tricks, no more strangeness?"

"Home," she said.

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This was not home.

This was the city from above, so close to the stars that Jeff thought he might reach out and touch them with his fingers. This was as far from home as could be.

Beneath him the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame passed by as he was pulled along by the strange woman. Together they followed the twisting vein of the River Seine through the city. Below the people, the cars like falling stars, streaked across the night streets and avenues.

What craziness was this, Jeff wondered? What mad dream, or hallucinogenic could cause such a realistic sensation?

"It's not a dream," the woman said from his right, reading his worry. She floated as if buoyed by an unseen current, the midnight cat still perched upon her shoulder. "Look, look at the city. See it as the pigeon in flight. This is what you came to see. What drove you here. But this is only part of what you must see to understand why you are here."

"What do you mean?" Jeff said, surprised that he had a voice as much as he was surprised at his pigeon-eye view.

She smiled.

And the city rushed up to meet them.

Jeff squeezed his eyes shut.

This is not happening. It's a dream or an hallucination. My brain is wonky, off-kilter. I've been drugged or hypnotised, or...

"Awake." Her voice was a summer breeze.

Jeff forced his eyes open to a sight that was neither home nor unfamiliar.

He'd seen this place in the brochures. They offered tours around Père Lachaise Cemetery, where you might see the headstones of...

"The cemetery, why are we in a cemetery?" he said, but he was beginning to realise why without her help.

The stranger flitted away from him, to dance between the headstones. A ballerina in amongst the dead. Filled with life where there was little life left.

Poets and ghosts!

Wasn't this the place where Jim Morrison had been laid to rest? The same cemetery where philosophers, musicians and artists also found themselves sleeping the longest sleep?

Poets he understood, all those buried in the cemetery might find that name attached to their lives, but ghosts? She couldn't mean...?

A shiver ran across Jeff's spine.

Ghosts, where else did you find ghosts but in a cemetery? But that couldn't be, could it?

Jeff fixed his terrified eyes upon the woman.

She danced her way, arching to touch first one headstone, then the next, from there to monuments and statues, from one etched name to another, and each she touched sparked as if a circuit had been completed. And each spark became something grander, more brilliant as it tumbled into the darkness.

Jeff blinked, but there was no ignoring what was before him.

A firework display of light filled the cemetery, white, blue and red. A waving flag in the dead of night. A country of colour in amongst the shadows and darkness.

Jeff watched, awestruck, his mouth open to speak, but unable to find any words that might fit what he was witnessing.

Could an hallucination be so vivid, a dream so colourful? What if this was real? What if...

The dance stopped, the flag ceased its waving, and the woman, the cat for company, stood before Jeff.

“Are you ready?” she said.

He found his voice and it was weak, paled by all he'd seen. "For what? I don't understand."

"You will. Take my hand."

Hand trembling, Jeff reached out.

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There was no flight, no city from above, or below. Only a dimly lit room in the belly of a building still wet with old stone.

There were tables and chairs, and upon the tables candles dripped into empty wine bottles. And soon the empty chairs were filled with a crowd that could not exist, yet did.

The names he wasn't sure of, but the faces were familiar. One table filled with artists, another philosophers, and yet a third with musicians. Wherever Jeff looked the ghosts of Pere LeChaise were in view.

Poets and ghosts.

Poets and ghosts.

He turned to the miraculous woman who had picked him from the tourist line.

She sat in the chair to his right, the green-eyed cat occupying yet another chair. They conversed with each other in a language of gestures, a language he was as unfamiliar with as he was French.

"How is any of this possible?" Jeff said.

She smiled.

"Because you came here, that's why."

"Just because I came here?"

"No, not only because you are here, but because you had a question that needed an answer."

"I didn't have a question, I wasn't even sure why—"

"Yes, here," she said, reaching over to touch the air in front of his heart, "here is where you asked that question. You wanted to know Paris, but did not know how to ask. You did as others do. You followed a line, seeing but never truly seeing the city. You were as they, a horse blinkered against the true beauty of this city."

"But—"

She waved a marbled finger at him.

"You did not have the language to ask the question that was in your heart. This...all this around us is true the language of any city. Here is your question answered, in the poetry of the people who make their home here. In the spirit that remains after they have passed."

Jeff opened his mouth to speak, but had no words. They were locked in his mind, still forming. Pieces of a jigsaw puzzle he hadn't yet put together.

What was the question she talked of? How could he ask a question that was not there? And what would the answer be to that—

"Do you want to know the question you asked?" the strange woman said.

Jeff nodded.

She pointed toward the front of the dimly lit room, where under a new and bright light a long-dead man took his position. A man who had been a lion in his youth, a bearded poet in the last of his short years. At one point he had called himself the King of Lizards, and tonight

he was here, in this Paris-strange night to address ghosts and poets.

Head lowered, eyes lidded, he spoke as all poets in a voice that caused tremors and earthquakes in the souls of those who listened.

And as he spoke, somewhere in the long distant Paris night, a church bell rang the hour.

Twelve chimes.

Midnight in Paris.

Jeff sat back in his chair, a glass of red wine appearing in his hand, and he listened to the words of a long dead man who was, for this brief moment in time, no longer dead.

He listened, and finally he heard.

He knew the question.

And now, he knew the answer, but he had to ask.

“What is your name?” he said to the woman at the table next to him.

“You already know, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I’d like to hear you say it.”



She smiled, and it was a timeless smile, the smile of a people with poet souls. A smile that was a country, history and the struggle of life.

"Some call me Liberty, but you may call me Paris," she said.

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He woke in the neat bed in the neat room of a neat Hotel that was far removed from the strangeness of the night before. Bleary-eyed he walked to the window to see Paris waking. The cars and the people, the smell of freshly baked bread as thick as any London fog greeted him.

Jeff smiled.

That strange feeling of warmth filled his stomach as it had the night before when he'd walked the streets of this not so foreign city to find his bed. When he'd wine-drunk, warm from conversation and the words of long dead poets, stumbled through unknown streets. There was no doubt in his mind about what had happened, and what it all meant.

Dressed he approached the reception desk and the man behind.

"Sir? Can I help you?" the man said.

"I think you can," Jeff said, the smile still strong on his lips. "Is there any chance of booking the room for another week?"

"You wish to stay one more week?" the man said. "Would you like me to organise some more tours for you? We have offers on for all the cultural hotspots in the city."

Jeff glanced to the doors and Paris beyond.

On coming here he'd not understood his motives, or what he might expect to see. But now he knew the secret of the city, of all cities. Out there poets and ghosts haunted the streets. They drank in midnight cafes, toasted the lives of those still living and those never to be forgotten. The spirit of the city wasn't in its monuments or its statues. It was in the people. A city was just people after all.

And this city that had taken his hand the day before and whispered him into that understanding.

Jeff turned back to the receptionist.

“I won’t be needing any tours, thank you,” he said.

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