Sacre Coeur - Deux vérités, un mensonge
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1: The Cephalophore

Saint-Denis was personally converted by Saint Paul and, a passionate and very brave man, he took the gospel to the Gauls, becoming the Bishop of Paris in the early 200s AD.

He was a dymanic speaker, convertings so many Parisiens that the local priests (Roman colonists) were horrified by his success. The complained to the Emperor Decius who became a campaign of persecution so devastating that by the mid 200s there was only a small group of Christians left at a place called Lutetia. Deni with his companions Rusticus and Eleutherius were on one side of the River Seine, the Romans were on the other. Unfazed by the Roman strength and threat, Denis continued to preach and was arrested, tortured and thrown into a cell.

After a long imprisonment, he and his companions were taken to the highest hill in Paris – Mons Martis, which was both a Roman and druidic holy place. Part way up the hill, on a grassy knoll, they were executed with steel swords, their heads tumbling from their shoulders to the grass of the mountain.

This however, was but a flesh wound for the tenacious Saint Denis. He bent down, picked up his head and carried it in his arms towards the top of the mountain, all the while preaching a sermon on repentance that touched even the most hardened of Roman soldiers.

Carrying one's own head, hiking several miles AND preaching is exhausting work however and he eventually succumbed to his injuries upon the summit of Mons Martis where he lay and was later buried by those local Christians who had survived the Roman persecution. One woman in particular, Genevieve, was determined to mark the holy spot and built a small chapel over his grave. Over the years this was rebuilt and renovated until it became the Saint Denis Basilica – a burial place for the Kings of France.

The mountain – originally named Mons Martis – or The Hill of Mars was cheekily renamed Mons Matyrdom – The Martyrs Mountain – a name that stuck and became the name of the entire arrondissement in Paris – Montmatre.

By the 1870s it was clear that Paris was in the grips of some strange chaos. The horror of the The Paris Commune, a radical socialist revolution that took government for a mighty seventy-one days, was only overshadowed by the countries defeat in the Franco-Prussion war.

The Catholic Church knew what was needed. The cities most rebellious neighbourhood – the ones behind behind the Paris Commune – were the bohemians who inhabited the mountain of Paris – Montmartre. What was needed was a symbol of love, forgiveness and above all – purity.

This came in the form of the very white (in face the stones have their own self-bleaching agent which is activated by rain), Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Paris. A huge church covering the entire top of the mountain, including the chapel of Saint Denis and looking down with both judgement and hope on the city of Paris. Finally finishes in 1914, the Sacre Coeur Basilica is nearly the most famous location in Montmartre.

It illuminates the Parisian night almost as brightly as its more famous neighbour – the Moulin Rouge – a venue that regularly makes the still exhausted Saint-Denis consider picking up his head and giving another sermon.

Remarque:

Denis' headless wanderings made him a fascinating subject for sculptors, so much so that a name has been given to the many images of him (and other decapitated saints like him) gently cradling his own head – the cephalophore. Of course the conundrum arises – where does one put the halo on a decapitated saint? Around the head? Or where the head should be?

There has also been a long running dispute over who actually owns that glorious talking head. Notre Dame Cathedral claims to have a small piece of the skull, accidently taken off on the executioner's first attempt, while Sacre Coeur claims the rest of it. Of course this also made for some interesting artistic decisions – the most politically correct artists show a bishop, holding a scalped head in one hand, and a dislodged halo in the other.

2: Trouvaille

I know this place. It's pulse matches mine. This is where my sisters have lived – Anais Nin, Simone De Beauvoir. Where my brothers and literary lovers have bled words onto pages – Hemingway, Kerouac, Wilde. They've been here before and I can feel them. I can taste them.

The edges of the brick buildings reveal tiny alleyways, cracks in the fabric of the normal. There is a red glow to the light even in the early afternoon, distant winter sun. It is warm and it opens me up. It could be the 1880s, it could be today – it might even be tomorrow morning already. Time is the dust in the air. I can smell absinthe and poetry through the window above me.

I have walked the cobbles from St. Germaine and the bohemia – my people – have fed me. Picasso's old guitarist played me through a secret garden and into a row of houses. Dali and I have dripped upwards out of a narrow staircase onto a hill.

It is not what I expect. I have come from the naked wild animalia of the streets of Montmatre and here I am now in the open, the whiteness blinding me. Sacre Coeur. It shouldn't fit. Not here next to this libertine scarlet world, dripping feathers and satire.

But it does. It cleans the air and breathes across Paris and the stairs are a hub of music, a man with his flute, a girl with a violin, a boy singing French folk songs. There is a coffee stand down there – I can smell it. I need it. I am full or art but low on resolve. But I am here at the top and Sacre Coeur is not a church to be ignored.

She is perfect. As gaudy as any Moulin Rouge girl. No simplicity. No gentleness. No silence. All-singing, al-dancing flaming-hearted Christ. More edges than Picasso. Notre Dame must despise this place, with its light and its beatnik angels. My head falls and I carry it with me, mouth open, halo round my wrist. I might never leave.

But for that smell… that coffee.

When I finally tumble the stairs, my feet refusing to leave quietly, I notice the sun is fleeing. First from the city and finally over thedome of the Basilica. At the base of the stairs in an old woman, white hair another cathedral in the sunlight. She is selling tiny angels, woven from scraps of some golden fabric. They whisper and I pay her for one. It sits in my pocket singing Ave Maria.

In the fading warmth I buy my coffee, waiting behind the flute player. He is older than I thought, maybe seventy, maybe more. He smiles at me and dusts me with powder as he gently pushes passed with some sort of pastry. It smells like music. I order: Le meme, s'il vous plait. My french is instant coffee, but the seller serves me anyway. The pastry is flaked …. and the café au lait, my satori in Paris.

As I walk I pass the flute player again, I see that he is sitting with the angel woman. The pastry was for her. They speak in soft French, the words rolling around them, visible in the air but still out of my reach. I run my fingers over the syllables as I leave and their conversation is suddenly the thing I want to take home with me from Sacre Coeur.

I take instead a handful of the last light, I'll need it for the walk home.

3: Sonder

The stairs to Sacre Coeur did not reflect the white marble virginity of the cathedral. Tramping pilgrims had been unwittingly harsh and they resembled less than ever the soft bed that Armin dreamed of. He surrendered to the Paris sunrise and sat up. Folding his newspaper bed-linen, he straightened his tidily patched suit and travelled to the small fountain where he drank, washed and tried to smooth the unruly wire on his head. He padded inside the freshly opened cathedral, put a coin in the hollow box and lit a candle for his wife. He raised his head. He never spoke to God anymore. There was no need. He merely stood gazing at the cross hanging in gaudy gold and blue magnificence above the altar. It made him smile. Every day.

The old Algerian walked back down the steps and drew a carved flute from his jacket. It was as old as he was. And almost as gnarled. He began to play and within moments earned his first kudos: ten cents. By midday the crowds would provide a substantial sum. The sun soaked him as he played and he closed his smile-worn eyes. It could almost have been Africa. He finally glanced up and she was sitting on the bench across from him.

For six years they had shared daylight with the church on the hill. He played; she sold rag dolls. He did not know where she went when the light whispered away. He knew nothing of her except as his best friend. Armin would sit beside her and talk as the sun set over the grey Paris rooftops, his accented French lilting up and down on the breeze. She rarely spoke. She hardly even acknowledged his presence. But she stayed every evening until the last vestiges of light evaporated. They were an odd pair: the African, proud in his role as homeless musician; and the sedate, elderly woman, beauty lingering in her face. Her eyes gazed over the city as her hands twisted fabric and wire into dainty fairies.

Armin finished his swan song, an Algerian lullaby and his flute returned to his coat. He counted fifty euro for the day and his ivory teeth glimmered for a moment. The tourist season was at its height and the British were liberal with

the euro. And of course, he was a very good flute player. The thought made him chuckle. Later, under the bank vault of darkness, the cash would be stashed under the west wall. He had almost saved enough. The teeth escaped again and his eyes wrinkled contentedly. He made a rash decision. A few of the notes bought two puffy cups of coffee. In a fit of indulgence he added two fat custard pastries. He had never bought her anything but today seemed a day to be generous.

She was surprised at his gift. She almost smiled.

"Bonsoir Madame," he bowed. Nuzzling the coffee she dared to look in the bag. A sigh of pleasure burst from her lips and she lifted it to her mouth. Pastry flakes floated around her. The custard melted softly. And she spoke.

"I used to be a cook." Her voice was like ripe fruit. "Not a chef. A cook. I made beautiful food for people I loved. I haven't let myself eat fine food in a very long time." She gazed into history, "I don't know why".

He patted her hand: their first touch. It deserved more notice than they gave it. They let the coffee warm their insides as the last rays of sun toasted their skin. He decided to tell her. "I have been saving my money. I will be leaving soon."

She turned. Her eyes almost met his. She would miss him.

"I wish to die in Africa. I want to sleep where it is never cold and never full of clouds." He smiled at her.

"It seems we have both been saving." She replied after a moment. "I want one last grand meal at Maxim's." His confusion amused her. "The greatest restaurant of Paris. Food for kings. I have bought a blue dress and a necklace of pearls and I will eat caviar and drink champagne and finish with cheeses and chocolate. That is what I have saved for."

The sun lost its tenuous grip and sank beneath the edge of France. The lights of the city sparked. Despite her cue to exit she stayed, her hand fumbling for his.

"I have saved a great deal." A long breath, "Perhaps before you leave you could dine with me at Maxim's?"

He did not look at her but his smile illuminated his face. "I will even buy myself a new suit for the occasion."

"Thank you." She squeezed his hand quickly, rose and shuffled elegantly around the corner of the park. Armin watched her leave and then laid out his newspaper mattress on the grassy hill in front of the great cathedral. As the summer air tucked itself around him he dreamed of lions and pearls.