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EXHAUSTED CONVERSATION



Jake stood impatiently on the platform. The backpack slung over one shoulder was a little heavier than he would have liked, but that's how it goes when packing for an adventure. It's all too easy to toss in another pair of socks or a sweater, not to mention the books, torch lights, toiletries, camera and dozens of other things which eventually wind up serving as a reminder of how material possessions literally weigh you down, limiting your freedom rather than enhancing it. This thought was weighing even heavier on Jake's mind than his pack. He had come to Europe seeking the freedom of the open road and the fresh perspective of other lands. He was looking for the *real* Europe. Waiting in the station he was painfully reminded of the fact that he was *not* hitching a ride in the back of a farmer's truck down some romantic Italian hillside just as the sun set. Instead he was in a very safe French *gare* with an expensive ticket, paid for by his well-to-do parents, overstuffed backpack on his shoulder.

He had spent several days in Paris getting over the jetlag and being shocked by how expensive everything was. *Is that what it is all about, money?* he thought. *You can get whatever you want, as long as you have the cash. Anything,*

that is, except a real life.

He hoped the train would be his ticket to adventure and out of his funk. Life was out there waiting for him, and he wanted to get started.

Monique stood further down the platform, the collar of her black wool jacket turned up against the cold wind coming through the open end of the station. She, too, hoped the train would soon arrive to rescue her from the cold that was passing through her like a whisper in the dark. Jake had been eyeing her on and off for several minutes. Not that he had really singled her out; he found the sophisticated look of the European women exotic and couldn't keep himself from studying their features. Monique just happened to be the closest girl of interest.

When the train finally arrived, they both boarded through different doors. Jake banged his bulky pack uncomfortably against seat backs looking for his seat. After stumbling through two cars, at last he found it and, to his delight, noticed that Monique was seated on the same bench seat. She looked up and smiled in a polite, noncommittal way, as a bank teller might to a customer waiting in line. Any brooding thought about the dark side of materialism suddenly vanished from his mind.

Jake clumsily crammed his pack into the overhead rack and took out a few things, including his Euro-tour guide book. He really hated that book most of the time. It seemed to embody the domestication of the wild world. Every little town was reduced to a few lines of what to see or do or photograph. It belittled the uniqueness of the experience of travel, as if you could just as well buy a set of postcards and a CD of "The Best Fotos of Europe" in the "Cultural Artifacts" aisle at Wal-Mart. Finally he plopped down in the seat and tried to think up any excuse to chat up the girl next to him. Nothing good came to mind.

"*Polly vu français?*" he eventually said, almost too soft to be heard.

"I'm sorry, what?" Monique asked, half closing the magazine she had been reading.

"*Polly vu French?*" he said again, realizing she spoke perfect English halfway through.

"Yes, of course. Do you speak French?" she asked in return.

"I, uh... no, not really. I'm American," Jake said as though admitting that he killed babies.

"Yes, I know." Her tone of voice was not exactly derogatory, more matter-of-fact, as though Jake had "BORN IN THE USA" tattooed on his face.

"Are you English?" he asked, unsure of her accent.

"No," she said as if only an American could be fool enough to mistake her for a Brit.

"Oh, you're French then, are you?" Jake asked again, trying not to sound like the ass that he felt like.

“Yes, I’m French.”

Now that he was right next to her, Jake could see that she was really stunningly attractive. He would have loved to chat and flirt with her for the rest of the five hour trip, but what could he offer her? He was an American — uncultured, ignorant of everything but the most basic European geography and dependent on his accursed guidebook like a floatation device in a ferry crash. She was beautiful, intelligent and sophisticated. He felt uncomfortable, like he was in the World Series with a Little League bat.

“So where are you going?” he asked just as she reopened the magazine to continue reading.

“Milano.”

“Oh, good. I’m going to Milan, too.” *At least I’ll have plenty of time to show her that I’m not just an ignorant American,* he thought. “Do you live there?” he continued, shifting around in his seat to face her more directly.

“No, my boyfriend does.”

Doh!

“And what does your boyfriend do?” he asked trying to hide his disappointment.

“He is a monetary analyst for the EU Currency Commission.”

Jake nodded his head with the “Oh, yah, every other kid on my block does that” nod.

“I’m just traveling around, you know, trying to find good places that aren’t... that aren’t too touristy,” he said as though she cared. Monique looked pointedly at his book and sighed with the resignation of one forced into conversation with an idiot.

“You wish to visit *unpopular* places?” she asked in the rhetorical tone of a teacher trying to lead the pupil away from the wrong answer.

“It’s just that everything here...” he paused. *This is going to sound bad.* “Everywhere in this book, it all seems so...” The idea in his mind was simply not lining itself up into neat little grammatically correct sentences.

“So what?” Monique asked, her voice slapping his wrists.

“So false... So materialistic...” he sputtered.

“France is materialistic and... *false?*” she asked, voice rising, magazine now clenched in fists like a weapon.

“No, no. It is just that I want to see the real Europe, not just the superficial, not just what everybody else comes to see, photograph and forget.” He battled to dig himself out of the hole he had dug for himself.

“Did you bring a camera?” she asked, rolling her eyes up towards his pack.

“Well, yes...” he admitted.

“When do you go back to America?” she continued the cross examination.

“My flight isn’t for three weeks,” Jake answered, not sure he liked where

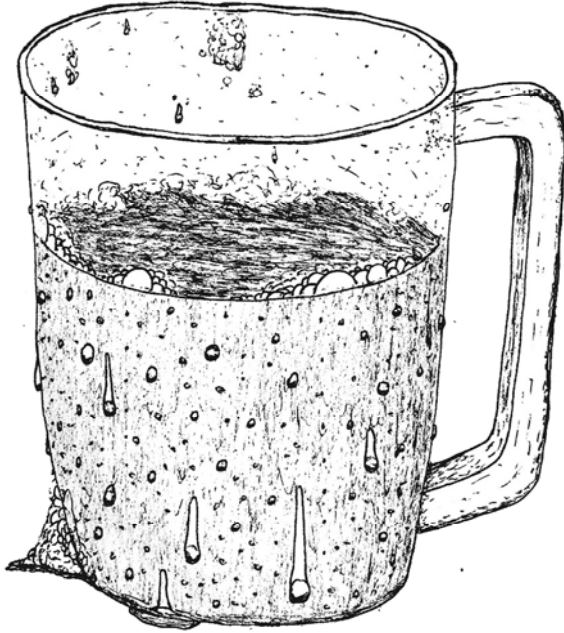
this was heading but unable to steer away.

“What makes you think that you can experience an entire continent with only three weeks in anything but a superficial manner? How will you do this, by visiting unpopular places? Tell me, what parts of France are not real?” She was looking straight at him, glaring at the right eye, then the left eye and back again trying to find which pupil he was hiding behind. “Will you go there and tell the people who live there that they are not real, that their mundane lives do not live up to your American standards of genuineness because they are so materialistic that they must work for a living? You are looking for some unique experience, different from what the rest of the million American tourists who come over here see, photograph and leave behind? You come over here, waving your dollars around, ride our trains, eat in our restaurants, insult us and you call us materialistic? Perhaps you should holiday in Texas or New York next year and see how well your lines work on an American girl.” Her angelic features had converted into sharp weapons, lacerating him.

Staring just long enough to burn away the last remnants of his self-esteem, she muttered something that sounded decidedly nasty in French, whipped the magazine open again and continued to read. Jake tried to sink into invisibility in his seat. He hoped he could make himself as small as he felt. Not a word passed between them for the remaining four hours and fifty minutes.

Perhaps Jake actually had found the elusive “real” Europe he was seeking after all.

CONVERSATIONS WITH A PROSTITUTE



A soft rain started falling in the growing purple of the night, cooling the hot tar of the pock-marked streets. It had been a sweltering day rummaging around the noisy, crowded streets of hawkers and tourists, and the slight drizzle was a welcome relief, covering everything in a soft sheen of light.

I decided to quench my thirst with a cool beer in a sweat-drenched glass, dripping condensation on to a bamboo-slat table. I often have to search for miles to find a place that matches the image in my head, but this particular night it took only a few blocks. The menu was painted on the walls with coarse brush strokes. A decent local beer went for thirty-five cents: I was home for the night.

Half way through the second one, I was just starting to get that tingling feeling percolating through my brain when a well tanned young woman in low-cut jeans and a tank top smiled as she walked over and sat at the table next to me.

“Hi,” I said, completely forgetting myself.

“Hi,” she said in that exaggerated tone with which a spider welcomes a fly. Her English was good — too good. She turned and straddled the back of the chair, allowing her shirt to ride up just enough to flash the sight of a metal ring in her naval. She was every inch the professional.

“I’m Jack,” I lied.

“I’m Bambi,” she lied back, extending her hand of slim, feminine

fingers. We shook. She had a tight grip that said that she was no stranger to men.

“So, Bambi... Care to join me?” I asked as though another option actually existed.

Joining me at the table she leaned forwards far enough to show the ruffed edges of her light purple bra.

She ordered a beer, and we swiftly passed the basic introductory prerequisites. It was clear that she had been down this same road many times before. She navigated the whole encounter so effortlessly that I couldn't even fool myself into thinking that she actually had any genuine interest in me. But what did I care? In some ways, it was the ideal situation really. Neither one of us cared enough about the other to tell the truth, so why bother lying anymore? She asked me what I did for work, and I admitted that I mostly avoided it.

“What do you do, Bambi?”

“Oh, I do lots of things!” she admitted, shaking side to side exuberantly.

“Like what, for example?” I continued pretending not to understand.

“Well,” she rolled her exaggeratedly large eyes up “I go to clubs and dance... and then go back to your hotel!” It would be hard to be more obvious.

“Good! I'm all in favor of that!” I stated, fully satisfied with her dedication to hard work.

“What do you mean?” she asked, tilting her head slightly.

“Well... you keep the other women honest.”

“Sorry?” she said, finally finding herself in unfamiliar territory.

“Well, women need a good... yardstick — someone like you — to keep them from going to pot.” Her head tilted a little more, and a few strands of hair swung in to partially cover her pretty face. I decided I had to make it crystal clear. “It's like glamour magazines. Women need to keep comparing themselves to beauties like you as motivation to keep themselves... *competitive.*”

She blinked her dark brown eyes at me.

“So they don't get all fat and old-looking,” I added. She seemed to be getting it, albeit against her will. She took another swig of beer and adjusted the straps of her thong.

“Like you,” I continued. “I mean you're really hot.” At this she perked up substantially. “But if you don't really work at it, you'll be so burnt out by the time your thirty that guys won't want you anymore.” Her tide seemed to ebb a bit. “You know that old line about how women are like wine, and they get better with age? Well the story is really a lot more accurate with milk rather than wine. Let's face it, time hits a woman like a baseball bat.” I think I actually saw her nostrils flair a bit at this one.

“And you think time is good to a man? You think women like fat, old,