

The Expatriot

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THIS IS NO *great literary work*; it is just a few of my thoughts as I encounter happenstances that interest me as I make a change in my life. It costs me money to do this, particularly for postage, so if these writings interest you and you'd like to see them continue, please be kind enough send me a dollar for each issue you receive or would like to receive. Your comments are also welcome.

THE EXPATRIOT

December 1, 1994

Where I'm At I'm still wondering what I'm doing in a way, why I'm going to France. I know the answer, that is, my head knows. This is something I've wanted to do for a long time—to live in Europe. It seems like almost a prosaic dream nowadays; a kind of bourgeois rite of passage. Yet what it offers, at least in my imagination, is very attractive. Direct experience with a foreign culture, finding out about it, exploring it like a new terrain of life. Learning what it is that I take for granted and finding out why it's not really granted. Learning what the French take for granted. My head also strongly suspects that my heart will soon ratify my decision.

France seems like a good choice for a lot of reasons; cheap rent sharing a flat with Philippe in Bordeaux; France has a rich, ancient, and thoroughly European culture and character; I love the bread; I already know some French, in fact can read it quite well; France itself has always interested me a lot; and I may actually become good at *speaking* a foreign language.

Maybe I'm trying to reinvent myself once again, like I did when I moved off the farm to start college; or like I did when I drastically changed my studies from linguistics to art. I really began to know who I was when I started to make films in 1979. I feel like I really came into my own when I started making my own artists' magazines

in 1983. I feel like those transitions were terminal good-byes to an old me; a me that seems like a stranger sometimes; to whose thoughts I somehow no longer enjoy access. This feeling comes across most strongly when I come across something I've written or sketched or committed to recording long ago. What was I thinking, I wonder; how did I come up with this. That puzzling strangeness of myself can be almost overwhelming at times.

The deal is like this; I know I want to put my head into a different place without losing where I put it, if you get my drift. It's not like I'm ashamed of my life to this point; in fact I feel like I can be proud of what I've done so far. My goal now is to keep being proud of myself, in fact. Not getting locked into something that has become a hollow exercise by virtue of virtuosity; of its being all too easy. Facing new challenges of my own making. Making certain that my reaching muscles don't atrophy.

California Junction There were a few interesting, even poignant, things that happened in my last days in Iowa that I'll remember well and always associate with this time of change. One of them centers around the town of California Junction.

I had wanted to visit this place ever since I came across it by accident in an old atlas that my Grandpa gave me. There it was, tucked away in a bend on the Missouri River, a tiny mark in Harrison county, so forgotten-looking, like an imperfection in the yellowing paper. I was curious about this place because of its name, mostly. It offered two clues: No doubt the "Junction" part had something to do with the railroad. A lot of little towns around here were founded largely by virtue of there being a railroad passing through the area. It is easy to imagine that the "California" part, in keeping with the westwardly-mobile culture we were for so many years, at one time referred to a train service that left from there for California.

Another thing that interested me about California Junction was its being a river town. I had formed a nostalgic interest in river towns

during road trips I had taken on nothing-to-do Saturdays with friends of mine. We'd drive. We'd end up in Clinton, Burlington, Dubuque, Keokuk; in other words, Mississippi River towns. I had no experience with Missouri River towns, and wondered what the similarities and differences, if any, between them might be.

Coincidentally, my Uncle Darell brought just such a town up in conversation after Thanksgiving dinner. He spoke of a small town in Harrison County situated right on a flood plain; he described the inhabitants as something akin to ne'er-do-wells and said that the government wanted to relocate them because the flood insurance was just too expensive or something like that. The people were refusing to move (who wouldn't?). He couldn't remember the name of the town. I asked if it wasn't "California Junction," just a shot, because as I said, the town tugged at my curiosity. To my surprise, he said, yep, that's it. This rekindled my interest in visiting there.

The day before my flight, Mom felt like taking a drive and suggested going to see the Canadian geese at DeSoto Bend, a wildlife refuge in Harrison County. As this was late autumn it was a good time to see flocks of geese gathering there, resting during their long flight from the Arctic to Mexico. I said sure, as long as we can drive through California Junction on the way and at least have a look. We ascertained that it was nearby and she agreed. I decided we would take some off-roads, because I hadn't seen much of this area, in spite of its being so close to where I grew up.

We drove through Persia, which Mom told me was where, when she was young and lived near there, her folks used to go and get groceries. She remembered that the family that ran the grocery store was Jewish, but blended in with the community just fine. I was surprised to learn that there was a Jewish family in this part of Iowa, and I wondered if they felt isolated, stuck in the middle of an otherwise largely homogenous group of German Catholics and Danes.

We drove through Beebeetown, which for me until then had been nothing but a name on an exit sign. There was a remarkable large

wooden building, perhaps an old high school or something, that was in disrepair and near ruins. A man was coming out of it with a load of boards. I thought it would make an interesting home and studio space. I guessed that a lot of the interior features were unusual and interesting. But it was obvious that it was being torn down.

We had some trouble finding California Junction. I was under the impression from the map that it was right on the river. We finally settled on a dingy little settlement that wasn't, and wasn't identified, but it was very clearly on a flood plain, just a spit north of the Lincoln Highway. You see, the Missouri River Valley is very wide. Once you clear the loess bluffs and come down to river level, there is a wide flat plain for several miles before the river. I guess this must have been flattened out by thousands of years of repeated flooding and erosion. Anyway, we decided that California Junction is perhaps a mile from the bluffs and a mile from the river. It has, oh, about a dozen houses, most of them shoddy. It has a grain elevator and a railroad passes right through town. There were no businesses that I could see, not even a gas station. There was not even a sign assuring me that this *was* California Junction but from its placement on the map, I don't know what else it could've been.

A Shipwreck A few miles down the Lincoln Highway lay the DeSoto Bend Wildlife Refuge. In the sixties, someone searching for the remains of a sunken Civil War-era steamboat had determined that DeSoto Bend was the site where this *Bertrand* had met her fate. They began digging, and sure enough, they found her. They also found her entire cargo beautifully preserved by the airtight muck of the Muddy Mo'. There was an amazing amount of stuff: canned fruit, whisky, glass and table ware, clothing, hats, gloves, the entire inventories of general stores then as yet unbuilt in the Gold Rush towns of the West. They built a museum to the *Bertrand* and put all of her unearthed cargo on display in a sort of theatrically-lit warehouse. The museum also boasts an exquisitely-made wooden model

of the *Bertrand* that is about eight feet long. Very impressive.

We also saw the Canadian geese. DeSoto Bend is one of their favorite resting places on their biannual migrations north to south and vice versa. There must've been a hundred thousand of them out there on the water and the ice floes. You could see dozens of their characteristic V-formations far in the distance coming in and going out. As the sun started to dip, they got really excited and most of them took off, all at once. The cloud of birds, a fog of flapping white wings, was dense and thick and big as the weather.

The Flight The next day, I was to board my plane on the other side of the Missouri River, in Eppley Airfield, on Nebraska's side of the river's flood plain. I could see Iowa and the loess bluffs from the terminal where I waited for the boarding call. I thought about how fitting it was that I should leave Iowa by flying entirely over it, rather like reviewing the trajectory of my life, on a geographic stage, by viewing from a distance the places where its main events took place. As I thought about this, the rigid geometry of Iowa unfolded beneath me like an exquisitely detailed road map.

I am on a flight from Chicago to Amsterdam right now. Dinner is now over, and that special kind of after-meal contentment settles over me. The food was good; smoked salmon, three precise cubes of beef and brussels sprouts, Bordeaux wine, excellent strong coffee and chocolate cake. As I squeeze a lemon wedge over the salmon and sprinkle it with pepper, I think of Heidi and I eating at Vito's back home, splurging on their smoked salmon and capers.

A man in the row behind me is urgently explaining something to his seat-mate in his loudest German. I hear conversations in French; the stewardess asks me, in essence, if I want to be addressed in French. I shy from the opportunity and say, "English please." There will be plenty of time for French later.

The lights have dimmed. A "Looney Tune" comes on the video monitor in front of me. People are beginning to put on sleeping masks

and trying to make themselves comfortable, either to watch the movie or get a few winks before we land. It's funny. We'll fly for seven hours and the clock will advance seven more as well, for a total temporal illusion of 14 hours, much of it still ahead of me.

December 2, 1994

Brussels I go to some effort keeping my things close to me, to make it harder for thieves to steal from me. It's possible to become a little paranoid when travelling alone, I find; and easier still when you haven't had any sleep for going-on 24 hours. I am coming to think, however, that the real sharks are the ones who run the cafeterias in the airports. They tried to charge me the equivalent of four dollars for a bottle of plain water; I opted not to make a purchase.

I have a 3-hour layover in Brussels. I am very tired, but there is nowhere to stake out and lay down. There are no drinking fountains. I think I'm dehydrated. I feel a little lost and apprehensive. I decide it is mostly because I am tired.

December 3, 1994

Amsterdam I got into Amsterdam yesterday, totally drained. Staked out my band's record label's digs with little difficulty. It's on Jodenbreestraat, just past the red light district from Centraal Station. I half expected John to be there waiting for me, but he wasn't. I talked for a bit with Frans, with whom I'd corresponded on my group's behalf. He then took me to the tramway, giving me directions to get off at Jan Vermeer Straat, in front of my host-to-be's apartment.

It was the day the Dutch celebrate what we'd call Christmas, so my hosts, Geert-Jan and his wife Fiona, had family obligations, and they left me alone at their flat in the evening. This was fine with me, as I felt like I could use some time alone. I kept looking at my watch. I could not believe what time it was. It always seemed like it was hours earlier than it felt like. I kept waiting and waiting for it to be

bedtime; one of the curious side effects of jet lag.

After several hours of this, I decided to take a short walk. I was very hungry. I looked at menus in a lot of restaurants but they all seemed too expensive. (I had only a few guilders on me, and had no idea where to find an automated teller.) At last, I saw the golden arches and sheepishly ducked into a McDonald's. I needed a little familiarity, I must confess.

A Walking Tour of Amsterdam I spent today (after sleeping for 14 hours) in the city, which I found I liked a lot. It has hundreds of small shops and cafés and tons of people on the street. I know no Dutch, but that did not hamper me, as everyone here seems to speak English. I spent the day admiring the canals, the bridges, the odd skinny tall buildings, the daring modern intelligent designs (such as in their bank notes) and just gawking at everything.

Fiona went out this evening, so Geert-Jan fixed me dinner. We spent the evening talking. I admired the CD packages Geert-Jan dreams up (some made of wood, metal, or odder materials), and watched Dutch television (they get lots of English-language stuff here, CNN and MTV included). It was good; the ice began to break and I enjoyed Geert-Jan's company a lot.

December 4, 1994

The Rijksmuseum Today we went to the Rijksmuseum and saw some paintings; mostly modernist and po-mo stuff. I remembered some of them from the Whitney Biennial in New York last spring. Duchamp's roto-reliefs were there, too, which I had seen a month before in Minneapolis with my friends Piotr and Dan. I wasn't really in the mood for art, so I looked around with vague interest.

It rained off and on all day, although it seemed warm outside. Geert-Jan and I spent much of the afternoon talking in his living room. He and Fiona fixed supper for me this evening, which was nice; an Englishwoman named Anna, who is an installation artist,

came over. We ate in the kitchen, which felt comfortable and familiar. Geert-Jan likes to take a lot of time preparing meals and enjoys the community aspect of it a great deal. My friend John is a lot like that, too. I am wondering where he is.

Any reservations I may have sensed from my Dutch hosts has completely dissolved by now. Geert-Jan and Fiona both have good senses of humor and are interesting to talk to. They have active, animated personalities that are warm and stimulating, but at the same time leave you on your own to discover what you want to discover.

Bicycling through Amsterdam After supper, we decided to see a movie. We were running late, so, rather than walk, we needed to take bicycles, which are practically *de rigueur* as a form of transportation in Amsterdam. But there were three of us and only two bicycles. So Geert-Jan told me to ride sidesaddle on the back of his (he assured me that this was a common practice). I am surprised at myself now, but I did agree to ride like this. We were slaloming in and out of heavy traffic, including cars and hundreds of other bicycles. I was hanging on to the seat-post with one hand and trying to counterbalance as best I could with my two legs hanging out the one side. Fortunately Geert-Jan was sure of his abilities and his strong legs delivered me safely to our destination with aplomb. I discovered, too, that the city seems to take on a new dimension when seen from the back of a bicycle. Certain grand architectural gestures, invisible to the foot-bound, can only be fully appreciated at speed, from a glassless, street-level distance.

The film we rushed to see was a collection of “Scopitone” reels from the sixties, which were a kind of short-subject musical films made to play in specially-equipped jukeboxes with little movie screens. We ran into two friends of my hosts and went into a bar for a beer. A discussion afterwards made me wonder if European intellectuals, although at times sweet and self-effacing, don’t like to think they know more about American culture than they actually do.

December 5, 1994

My Friend John Arrives John got in touch with me today. He had arrived from Prague on Saturday and couldn't reach me because the our label's offices were closed. A pity, but it sounds as if he had a good time with his friend Stefan, who seems to be a very good travelling companion for John. It's really great that he could make it and it's really good to see him again.

John, Stefan and I spent most of the day kicking about town, going to a grocery store to get food so that we could eat more cheaply than restaurant fare. After carefully inspecting the park benches for pigeon dung, we sat down and ate our lunch at Rembrandt Plein, so-named after the painter and graced with a bronze likeness of the same, a small park near where the old section of Amsterdam meets the newer section.

I spent the rest of the day with John after Stefan left to go hitch-hiking back to Düsseldorf. John and I just hung out for the rest of the evening. We walked through the red light district, which was trippier than I remembered it from ten years ago. It's a scene of women in their underwear sticking out their tongues and provocatively curling them up, licking the window glass at passersby. We finally settled in a coffee shop not far from the Concertgebouw and sat and drank coffee and talked some more. We sat there and admired the beautiful, arty people who came, sipped coffee, *tête-à-tête*d and left, as John told me about his life in Prague.

A Magical Moment It came time to leave, and it had begun to rain. We separated, each off to his lodgings for the night. While walking through the passageway that goes through the ground floor of the Rijksmuseum, I had a kind of nonintellectual realization or magical moment. It was simply a way in which the sounds, smells and sights of some place and time along with a set of feelings, meld and strike you so you just notice and remember. It stopped me in my tracks. I

stood under one of the archways and I could see the rain coming down, illuminated by yellow street lights. The cobblestones of the street shone, and the rain made a gentle sound as it hit them. A homeless man was playing guitar in the passageway for guilders; it echoed big and sounded majestic. It was cold out. I was in Europe.

December 9, 1994

The Last Day in Amsterdam John and I hung out for the most part on the 6th. I met him at 10:00 at Rembrandt Plein, which was to become our usual meeting place. It was much colder than the previous day and it was a little less pleasant to hang out outside, but for the most part, we did anyway. We stood around, gawked at the funny buildings, marveled at the ingenuity of the Dutch, made humorous comments at their expense, took snapshots, acted like tourists.

John had a stubborn refusal to spend any money on food, if he could avoid it (I think more variety would've done me a lot of good) and we bought cheese and bread in the market. I didn't complain about the food; it was fine, but it was uncomfortable eating outside in the cold wind, and there was nothing hot to drink. Nonetheless, it was great spending time with John and seeing Amsterdam, and saving money at this point was probably a good idea.

I guess I am pretty impressed with this city. It has all the charm one wants from a European city and it is also easy to get around in. Amsterdam seems very compact, at least the interesting parts are centrally located. The canals are a wonderful added complication, virtually forcing a city design around the pedestrian, because the streets are narrow. That does not mean there are not many cars in Amsterdam, for there are, but most seem to negotiate the tight routes with care and skill. My hosts, Geert-Jan and Fiona, have been very kind, giving me a key to their flat and free reign.

My Group on the Radio In the evening, John and I went with Geert-Jan to be on his weekly radio program. We did a little interview and

played some of our work. We discussed the future of our collaboration, and I played some of the samples I've been working on. I wondered who in the world would be interested in this stuff, since at least some of our audience was certain not to know English. It was a very late-night show, and we did not get back to Geert-Jan's until after two o'clock.

The Train Trip to France The next day, I spent almost the entire day on the train. John had stayed overnight with me at Geert-Jan's and we had to get up at around 5:30 to be sure of catching the tram to the Centraal Station to catch my train at 6:57. As we waited for boarding, we drank coffee and ate more cheese sandwiches.

By the time we got to our third stop, which I think was Rotterdam, my train compartment was full except for one seat. Anyway, I read from my friend Jesse's novel, which she had generously given me on my last visit in Madison. I got deeper into the story which has a poetic sense and canny structural complexity to it. The chapters alternate between the separate stories of the two main characters, who mesh up in the middle, separate, and rejoin at the end. The setting is in France. Since I've heard Dan and Jesse describe some of the places they'd visited which appear in the book, it interests me to see how she uses these ideas in her work.

The train was two hours late arriving in Paris (the Belgian woman sitting across from me nattered about that for a couple of minutes in broken English). It was raining and the train was too long to fit into the station, and my car was not under cover, so I got a little wet running down the platform.

I'll Always Have Paris, Or Will I? I had arranged to have a few hours layover in Paris to change trains, so that I could walk and see things for a bit. But because of the rain, I got on the Metro right away to go from the *Gare de l'Est* to the *Gare Montparnasse* (a journey which goes under the Seine and takes about twenty minutes). A woman, whom I believe was deranged, got on, and because of the crowd on

the subway, stood very close to me. She was speaking out loud to herself in French about “microbes” (I believe she was referring to the other passengers) and slapping the side of her cassette player, whose door had broken off. She was angry about something, and I was afraid she might address me directly. She didn’t, fortunately.

Très Grande Vitesse So I sat in the *Gare Montparnasse* and read more of Jesse’s book. I’m glad I had that to do for three hours. I boarded my TGV as soon as its number showed up on the board. It’s a beautiful, clean, sleek new modern kind of bullet train. A beautiful young woman took the seat next to me. She was reading something that looked intellectual and French from a xerox copy; I surmised that she was a graduate student from her demeanor. I did not dare speak to her as I was filthy from hours of travel and a three-day-old shower. I was also concerned with sounding stupid in French.

It was dark by the time we left so I didn’t see much scenery. The train was fast, however, and the kilometers slipped away. The ride was smooth so it didn’t feel like there was much connection to the surface of travel. We reached Bordeaux in about three hours. Philippe was at the station to meet me. He looked genuinely pleased to see me. He got me on a bus and we took it to the *Place de la Victoire*, not two blocks from the door up to his flat on the 4th floor.

My New Flat This place deserves to be described in some detail. The building itself has some five stories and seems to be made completely of stone. The roof is red tile, just like most of Bordeaux’s buildings. There seems to be only the bare minimum of wiring in the building. The halls and stairwells are unlit for the most part. The toilet is in the corridor. It is, from what I can tell, simply a porcelain stool over a hole stories above the sewer. You flush it by pouring water from jugs into it. It works well, in its way, but when the weather gets warm, I suspect that the ammonia smells coming from it could get to be overpowering.

There is no bathroom in Philippe’s flat. I wash myself in the

kitchen. There is a shower, but its installation is not yet complete. At first, I was actually a bit shocked at these conditions, but they seem pretty workable after only a couple of days of using them. They really don't bother me that much. In fact, I really very much like living in this place. It is very comfortable, for all of that.

Philippe has refused to allow me to pay rent. He says this apartment is going for much less than what it ought to. The landlord is an old man who doesn't care about making improvements to his property (obviously), nor does he care about raising the rent (fortunately). So I will be spending less money than I thought I would be. Maybe I can last a year on the money I've got saved up.

The living room (where Philippe sleeps) has a fireplace and two very high shuttered french-style windows that overlook *Rue Sainte-Catherine*, which is paved for pedestrians and has a lot of shops geared for the student population of Bordeaux, who live in the area.

December 11, 1994

Bordeaux For the last few days I have been getting a good look at my new temporary home town. It is very old and French-looking, in a stereotypical way, even more so maybe than Paris. All the buildings are grayish or yellowish and made of stone, with very rough cobbles in radiating patterns in the streets. There are "french" windows on all the buildings above the *rez-de-chaussée* (the ground floor), and all of them have shutters on them that actually work (I am familiar only with the American simulacra shutters that merely adorn many homes in the States.) Many windows have wrought iron balconies, giving the city a feel similar to New Orleans or Montréal. The chimneys are rectangular mortar and brick structures, each with several clay pot-shaped projections on top, which are tubes which allow the smoke to escape. In a word, it is *picturesque*.

Le Shopping I have gone to the *supermarché* (the supermarket) and the *marché aux puces* (the flea market) on my own, and Philippe

has taken me many places as well. There always seem to be lots of people out and about. The streets begin to hum and click with activity around ten in the morning. You can hear it when the stores open because you begin to hear a steady hailstorm of women's shoes going "click click click" on the cobble stones.

The *supermarché* is very much like an American supermarket. The commodities are somewhat different, but the basic structure is the same. A minor difference that had created an embarrassing situation, and which I had to learn from, and is interesting only as an example of a minor difference that nonetheless creates frustration and thwarts expectation, is that fruits and vegetables must be weighed and priced before getting to the checkout, because there are no scales at the checkout. The *supermarchés* all seem to have special counters for this, some automatic, others tended by bored saleswomen or teenagers. They also tend to sell many more kinds of cheeses and wines than in the U.S., which is as one might expect.

Social Calls Philippe's brother, Thierry, comes over occasionally to fix things. Philippe told me that he himself is not competent about such things. The other day, Thierry replaced the lock on the front door. He seems to have a good eye for detail, and seems to relish a job well done. Soon, I hope, he will fix the shower.

Philippe seems to have many visitors. He has a girlfriend named Sakina who has visited twice and seems to call several times in a day. She is very nice, a graceful Algerian woman who takes the time to speak to me in slow and careful French and patiently awaits my response. I find that I like Sakina because of this.

The other night, Sakina invited us out for something to eat in a restaurant with her friend, Giselle. We went to a Chinese restaurant named *Le Tonkin*. The food was not bad; there were some similarities to Vietnamese cooking, such as serving fresh mint with the egg rolls. I kept up with the conversation as best I could, which is to say, not a lot. At the end of the evening, both women did that French

two-cheeked sort-of-kiss with both of us.

Yesterday evening, Philippe's hip zinester friends, Patrice and Céline, came over for *un pot* (a drink) and some conversation. They seemed very young, sort of like art students in their twenties, which, no doubt, is exactly what they are.

December 15, 1994

Studying (the) French I've been reading *La nuit privée d'étoiles*, by Thomas Merton, in French translation. Not because the book interests me so much, but because Philippe has recommended it to me as an example of good French prose. So, I've taken it on as a project. I'm looking up every word I don't know or am not sure of. I'm keeping a detailed notebook. I'm using a dictionary that's all French (the well-respected *Robert*); no English half to it. So if I have to look up another word, or another to understand the definition, then I do it. Some very interesting digressions have come about and I believe I have learned some useful words doing it this way.

My comprehension has really improved a lot in just a few days. The biggest problem for me right now is my speaking. It's really difficult for me to form sentences in French; the words don't come; I stammer because I'm unsure of the structure. I can only hope that it seems worse to me than it does to the people who have to listen.

When Philippe goes off to work on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and I have the place to myself, I read; I go out walking; I do not-much on my computer. I'm not very productive in some sense; on the other hand, I'm trying to learn a foreign language in a way that is not superficial. I want to come away from this experience with a minimum of competence in French; if not fluency.

The Marketplace On Saturday morning we went to the market, which is held at the *Place St.-Michel*. It's like a farmer's market in Iowa, except they sell things like live chickens, rabbits and pigeons, as well as fruits and vegetables, homemade jams and fresh honey,

wines and cheeses and good stuff like that. It's also much larger than the ones I've seen, and very crowded. There's a special quality to the produce, some sense that it is made with more care and dedication than the supermarket fare. We bought a few vegetables and some shrimp, which we took home for lunch.

Later, we went out walking and stopped by some friends' homes to chat. Bernard, who lives on the *Place St.-Michel*, was very nice (I remember him from 1989). On the way back into our building, we dropped in on another guy, Patrick, who lives downstairs from us. He was very nice and served me Irish whiskey. Philippe's brother and mother came by later in the evening, but did not stay long.

Pulling in the Waves I try to watch some television and listen to the radio. I can gauge my listening comprehension best by that, because I know the speakers aren't making allowances for me. I can understand virtually everything Philippe tells me, but he has to speak carefully. Last night we were both tired, and each of us was speaking our native language and listening to the other in the opposite language and communicating without problems.

I felt like my listening comprehension was getting better, but now I think it's not improving as fast as I thought. But I'm not discouraged; after all, I've only been here a short while.

December 18, 1994

The Pyrénées For the last few days I have been thinking about my trip to the Pyrénées and Spain, which will begin tomorrow. My sister and her family are coming to pick me up tomorrow morning. I have been studying the *Michelin Guide* to find out what interesting things are within driving distance of the cottage they are renting. We will be in the *Pays Basque* (Basque Country), which interests me a lot, since it's a linguistic and cultural island floating in a sea of Indo-European. We will also be near the Béarn, a region which offers some interesting culture, I'm told, and is one of the many little coun-

tries that make up France. We will be staying in the village of Bidarray in a *gîte*, which is the French word for “resting place.” Commercially, a *gîte* is a country cottage that’s available for rent on a medium to short-term basis.

Food and the Daily Grind I spend my days walking through the markets, searching for nothing in particular. It takes me several hours sometimes, and I usually only come home with a baguette, a delicious long crusty loaf of bread. It’s cheap food, as each one costs about 70 cents, I figure. Sometimes I splurge and buy some chocolate. Since I am not smoking anymore, I figure that chocolate is an okay vice to have.

The meals that Philippe prepares for me (I have prepared a few meals, too) are not bad, but sometimes they seem incomplete or oddly constructed, or just unfamiliar. They are sitting okay, which is to say they don’t seem to affect my digestion adversely, which is a good sign. He is mostly vegetarian, so we eat potatoes, rice, bread, and pasta. This is all very good food. We also eat canned tuna, shrimp, eggs, other fish and seafood.

After every meal, there is a cutting board with a half dozen kinds of cheese brought out; goat cheese, bleu cheese, brie, a surprising variety of tastes and smells. Wine with lunch and dinner. Philippe drinks an instant chickory beverage for breakfast, which does not have enough caffeine in it for me, so I bought a jar of coffee.

Everyday that Philippe is not working, his 7-year old son Samuel joins us for lunch. I get the impression he doesn’t know what to think of me; an adult who can’t speak very well. Sometimes I say funny things or make funny faces for him, and then he laughs. He likes to draw and look at picture books. Philippe proudly points out that Samuel’s favorite books are all nonfiction, so that the kid’s a chip off the old block. It often strikes me that there is a point of convergence between Samuel and me, in that we are both learning to speak French; although Samuel has the leg up on me in that. A lot

of conversation and broadcast just flows past me; I think I'm improving, and then I think I'm not.

January 2, 1995

Chez ma Sœur Things have been really odd and uncomfortable for the past few weeks; and there really hasn't been much of a chance for me to keep up on these entries, so they have gone by the wayside. Staying with my sister and her children has been very difficult at times for me. It makes me very aware of how used I am to being in an adult world with adult priorities being virtually the only determinant of my actions. Children, I have come to think, are a breed apart. At least my sister's are. Anyway, the approximate line of the story goes like this.

My sister and her husband and children made it to Bordeaux to pick me up, bringing along the four boxes I had mailed to them earlier so that I could have my laser printer, some extra clothes, and a few other things. I am very grateful for them coming up this far with my things. I consider this to be no small favor. They came up for some of their own reasons as well; my sister's ancillary mission in Bordeaux was to visit the only Ikea store she could find near the Iberian peninsula.

The Gîte So the main point of this adventure was to rent a *gîte* in the Basque country so we could have a place from which to base our excursions out among the villages and mountains of the Pyrénées. The *gîte* was nice, in its way; modern plumbing, nice kitchen, faux-"rustic" touches. The town Bidarray is partly on the level of the river Nive and partly up the side of a small mountain, with a rugged Basque church and cemetery across from a tourist's watering hole. Unfortunately, it rained nearly the entire time we were there (it being the rainy season after all, and the reason, no doubt, why the off-season rates for the *gîte* were so reasonable) and so I was either stuck in a cramped cottage with three whiny children or stuck in a

station wagon with three whiny children. I noticed us saying over and over again as we went through the damp countryside on shiny wet roads, “This would be so pretty, if it weren’t raining.”

It Rained In between showers, we drove through the countryside. We stopped in the towns of St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port, St.-Étienne-de-Baïgorry, Ainhoa, Itxassou, and other villages with amazingly-spelled Basque names. One day-long excursion into the Béarn took us to Pau, Oloron-Ste.-Marie, and many other villages too numerous to remember. It snowed some that day. In spite of the weather, we have managed to see a lot, and a lot of it has been interesting.

The villages are exotic and entrancing to me. The streets are sclerotically narrow; often it seems that a passing car could take the front door off a house if its owner did not carefully check the way before stepping out. The walks are no more than six inches wide in places, so most people walk in the street. Many of the villages have only one sight for the *Michelin Guide* to proffer: a medieval bridge *en dos d’âne* (like a donkey’s back); i.e. an arch made of stone. And little tiny shops packed with stuff that’s been on shelves for decades.

Back at the *gîte*, the children watched television. It is a testament to that medium’s power of attraction that the kids were glued to the set in spite of the fact that all the programming was in French and they could not understand a syllable of it. Perhaps the television “referent” was sufficient to trigger the response “I am being entertained.” I don’t know. But it was interesting. Even the adults fell prey to this phenomenon.

In addition to paying the week’s rent for the *gîte*, we were required to fork over a substantial damage deposit. When the landlady came over to collect both fees at once, the transaction required French, and so I was called upon. I was able to formulate sensible questions in French, but understanding the answers to them was quite another story. I did understand, however, that we would receive our damage deposit back only if nothing was broken. The landlady repeated the

phrase in French three or four times, “*si rien n’est cassé*,” I guess to make sure that I understood.

My sister worked like a fiend in that *gîte*. I helped her out whenever her efforts seemed reasonable, such as in doing laundry or dishes, or setting the table or helping to cook. She was fixed on getting the damage deposit back, and so she insisted on scrubbing all the bathrooms and all the floors in the place before leaving.

January 3, 1995

On to Spain We left for Spain very early in the morning on Saturday, which was Christmas Eve. We had a sixteen-hour drive ahead of us, from Bidarray via Madrid, to the southern Atlantic coast of Spain at El Puerto de Santa María, which shares a small bay with the city of Cádiz. I was surprised (in retrospect I am surprised at my surprise) at how much like the desert southwest of the U.S. much of Spain resembles. Mexico must have felt something like home to the *conquistadores*.

I have now been here in El Puerto de Santa María for over a week, and we have taken several sight-seeing trips, but I only spent one afternoon in downtown El Puerto and didn’t really do it justice since I was coming down with a cold and was very cranky.

The White Villages of Andalusia One day we did a road trip to Arcos de la Frontera, one of the “White Villages of Andalusia,” perched on a mountain of rock, with sheer drops of a hundred feet from the Parador’s vista-points. The village also has an eye-popping baroque church which we stumbled upon just as a funeral service was ending. We went in and respectfully gawked about among the teary mourners who were exiting. Every inch of the place profuded with hand-carving, some of it gilded or painted, and with astonishing canvases and stained glass. It was ornate and completely dazzling. Even more amazing was its holy relic, which consisted of the desiccated body of St. Felix, in its entirety, who died in the 3rd cen-

tury, on display, cramped into a glass box smaller than a coffin, with a fluorescent tube glowing pus-green to keep him company. He was dressed in lace, and you could see his grayish bones through the sheer fabric. Very tasteful. And easy to explain to the kids.

Later, we made the three-hour drive to Granada to see the Alhambra, which is a place-I've-wanted-to-see ever since adolescence, having read Richard Halliburton's description of it in his book *The Royal Road to Romance*. This book had a big influence on me as a young teenager; it gave me a real thirst to visit Europe and indeed the world. True to Halliburton's claims, the Alhambra boasts some of the most beautiful building interiors on earth. I was touched by the cunning and skill with which forms and space were arranged, and the way color, pattern, repetition and detail were used on every available surface in such a skilled way as to avoid any sense of visual chaos. They also used marble conduits and running water in a sensuous, even playful way, and the sound of trickling water helps create the setting. All is harmony and order at the Alhambra.

Another day, we went to Ronda, another of the "white cities," with perhaps a more spectacular setting than Arcos. Ronda's park has a promenade along the edge of a sheer rock cliff. Looking down, you see what almost looks like a map of the valley below, you are that high up. The town is divided in two halves, an old town and a newer one, which span a deep gorge and which are joined by a spectacular stone bridge (I'm guessing 18th century). We didn't get into the old town on the other side of the gorge, which I regret. I'll have to visit Ronda again someday to do just that, and to see the bridge, which was under repair, without its scaffolding.

It has been sunny here, although fairly cold at times. The rainy season this year apparently has been very dry and the community is on the verge of a water crisis. Generally, it is very cold at night (I cover up with two thick sleeping bags) and cool in the daytime. If the sun comes out, as it does most days, it feels good and warm in the sunshine. It's definitely winter here.

January 10, 1995

How I Spent Epiphany I didn't get to see much more of Spain during my remaining days with my sister's family; the Pryca (a Spanish version of Wal-Mart) was about it. But one thing deserves to be mentioned: the Three Kings Parade. The Spanish celebrate the birth of Jesus on the twelfth day of Christmas, the church holy day of Epiphany, or January 6. Most Spanish towns, El Puerto included, sponsor a parade with floats and marching bands to celebrate. Townspeople dressed as Magi ride in floats and throw hard candies and sometimes toys at the waiting throngs, as children scramble to collect the goodies. Marching bands play sour, but lively, renditions of "When the Saints Go Marching In," in an unfamiliar cadence. I competed with the crowd, helping my nephews collect the candy. Sometimes it felt like it was raining the stuff.

I am now on a Spanish train, between Valladolid and Burgos, on my way back to Bordeaux. I spent part of the afternoon (between trains) in Madrid at the Prado, which is really a rich collection, full of the things you see in art history books. It is pretty easy to think that art history books show you a complete view of art history, but obviously they can't. That message comes through full force in a visit to Prado. For every widely reproduced work there are dozens that are no doubt unreproduced and yet they are just as good and rich and skilful the famous ones. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised at that, but it's brought home so abundantly here that I can't help feeling a certain awe. Too, the Prado is full of the kind of stuff I sympathize with these days; classical allegorical works and heavily symbolic sacred works; nothing modern. At this point in my life, this kind of art feels like nourishment to me; whereas a lot of the contemporary stuff just feels draining.

Back in France The entire train ride back to Bordeaux was tiring. I started off on the wrong foot in El Puerto by actually getting onto

the wrong train and not realizing it until after it had started moving. I momentarily panicked. I soon realized that at least it was going in the right direction, and what I'd done was get onto a commuter train that left before my train, and that it would stop at the next station, Jerez de la Frontera, where I could get off. I was fortunate that my train had a scheduled stop at Jerez, as well, so I simply had to wait a few minutes and board it when it pulled in.

I sat beside a little old Spanish lady who was very quiet for half the way to Madrid, and then decided to start a conversation with me. My Spanish is very weak these days; I regret not having kept it up over the years, but that's life. Anyway, she soon realized that I wasn't going to be a very good conversationalist, and politely gave up.

At Madrid we came into Atocha, the downtown station right near the Prado. My train for Bordeaux left from Chamartín, so I grabbed a subway to there, where I waited for two hours. The train itself wasn't very crowded, which was pleasant; I could stretch out a bit. In my compartment was only one other passenger, who again tried to converse with me, and as before gave up. He got off at Valladolid, so for most of the way I had the compartment to myself.

At the border, at Hendaye, on the French side, we went through customs (a simple glance at my passport, no formality) and changed trains. We sat in our new French train for two hours before it started moving, at 3:36 AM. I tried to sleep, but didn't much. We arrived at Bordeaux-St. Jean at 6:00 AM.

Now that I am back in Bordeaux, and am looking through the boxes I shipped over, which arrived with my sister, I find myself wondering, what is all this stuff for? Why did I think I'd need it? I just panicked, I guess, suddenly feeling uprooted, and that I'd like a few clods of my native soil to cling to for comfort. And actually, it feels pretty good to have it here.

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