

# **THERE'S ONLY *One* PARIS**

*Tales from Pandemic Paris*



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## *Le Métro*

### *1st & 2nd Arrondissements*

“Nooooo!”

Sasha ran and launched himself into the *Métro* car just as the buzzer sounded. He was immediately tugged backwards. The corner of his shoulder bag was caught in the closing doors. He freed it with a hefty yank, allowing the doors to shut properly. The train set off.

“No! I mean yes! I wasn’t saying no to you,” Sasha shouted into his phone as he regained his footing. “Yes, I’ve got it...”

There were two empty flip-down seats next to him. He lowered the closest and plunked himself down.

“I’m on my way now. I should be there shortly,” He then removed a handkerchief from the zippered pocket of his satchel and dabbed his brow. He’d worked up a sweat on his race to catch the train. Well, considering recent events, it didn’t take much for Sasha and his level of anxiety to surge.

*“Il n’y a qu’un seul Paris... Paris... Paris...”*

*Oh no!* Sasha grumbled to himself. No wonder that section of the *Métro* car was empty. He’d been in such a hurry to catch the train, he hadn’t paid any attention to the state of where he was landing.

*“Paris... Paris!”*

Most Paris *Métro* cars were divided into sections comprised of groups of stationary seats alternating with open areas. The latter had poles for standing passengers to hold on to as well as flip-down seats which could be used when the car wasn't too full. Sasha was in one of these, and there, just a few feet away from him, was a musician. She was accompanying her passionate singing with a concertina, a mini accordion. The resulting tune was so loud Sasha could barely hear the person on the other end of the phone.

“What was that?” he yelled into his cell.

*“There's only one Paris...!”* the subway performer bellowed, switching into English.

*Oh brother! I hope she gets off at the next station!* Sasha bemoaned as he was trying to make out the instructions provided to him over the phone.

*Petite* in stature, but *grande* in voice, the musician had a dark brown bob atop which was a bright red beret. She was dramatically pressing the tiny keys on her accordion which, in turn, wheezed out a melody to go along with her crooning. Something about her look, and her emotional expressiveness, evoked the great French songstress Edith Piaf.

“I'm sorry, could you repeat that?” Sasha hollered. He plugged his free ear in an attempt to close off the annoying background noise. “I can't hear you very well.”

As they approached Pyramides station, the Line 7 conductor made an announcement which further added to Sasha's audible difficulties. He glared up at the *Métro*'s built-in speaker then over to the musician. With any luck she'd be getting off at the next station.

“What time did you say?” Sasha asked, frustrated. He couldn't handle any further stress right now. He was already on

the brink of a nervous breakdown. “Yes, yes. As I said, I’m on my way now. You’ll definitely have it by 4:30.”

The *Métro* pulled up to Pyramides station. A few people got off. The performer was not one of them.

“*There’s only one Paris... !*” She belted out once again.

Sasha was trying to concentrate on his call, but he was getting increasingly annoyed by the musical distraction.

“*Il n’y a qu’un seul Paris...*”

Sure. There’s only one city in the world *like* Paris, Sasha reflected on the lyrics of her song. But there are many different ‘Paris-es’ within the city. He possibly knew this better than anyone. He wasn’t simply considering the city’s 20 arrondissements, its administrative districts. Each of these had its own distinct personality. But beyond these larger borders, each arrondissement had a multitude of sub-districts, its *quartiers* or neighborhoods. Within these were a myriad of specific places, from historic sites to colorful markets and from local cafés to picturesque parks, which also influenced that neighborhood’s spirit. Then there were the types of people found in each *quartier*; its residents, other Parisians or foreigners passing through. Finally, there was the River Seine, much more than a border between the Left and Right Banks, it had a whole life of its own. The sum of all of these individual components made up this ‘one and only’ Paris. But how were these very strange times, with a worldwide pandemic, affecting Paris? What were the short and long term repercussions of the virus? Besides the effects of the current state of the world, Paris was also changing in so many ways and at a rapid pace. Would the city always be this ‘one and only’ Paris?

“*Paris... Paris!!*” enthusiastically concluded the musician.

*Good!* Sasha huffed as he was pulled from his thoughts and back to the present moment. He was ready to give her 20 euros

just so she'd shut up. With one hand holding out a small leather pouch, about the size of her palm, and the other pressing away on the accordion's keys, this musician made her way through the carriage soliciting spare change for her tune. Now that the noise levels had gone down, Sasha unplugged the ear that was not glued to his cell.

"Oh yes, it was a very close call," he told the person on the other end of the line. He was opening his mouth to add something when a squeaking accordion note went off in his newly unplugged ear. He swung his head up and saw the smiling face of the musician. *Shouldn't she be wearing a mask??* He admonished. He supposed it would be hard to sing with one on, nevertheless, she was spewing her germs around with each and every energetic *Paris!*

"*Une petite pièce pour la musique, monsieur?* Spare some change for the music, sir?" She asked, rattling her pouch under his nose.

*Yes... if you go away and leave me alone!* Sasha screamed in his head. Exasperated, he jammed his hand into the pocket of his jeans, removed all the change he had and tossed it into her pouch.

"*Merci, monsieur!*" She acknowledged cheerfully. She then continued down the carriage to canvas and cajole the rest of the passengers. Sasha took a deep breath, relishing in the return of a blissfully serene ambiance.

"Yes. A very, very close call indeed. But I've got it here," he said as the train pulled into the platform, at Palais-Royal-Musée-du-Louvre station. "Right here." He added, patting the pocket of his jeans. The *Métro* car doors flung open.

*Wait a second...* Sasha patted his now empty pocket. Panic instantly washed over his face. It *had been* right there. Right there with his spare change.

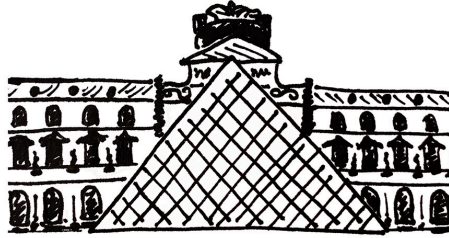
*The musician!*

The *Métro* buzzer sounded. The doors started closing. Sasha sprang up and leaped out just in the nick of time. He narrowly missed getting his bag caught once again. Teetering to recover his balance, he looked down the platform and over the sea of commuters.

*Which way did she go?*

People were rushing in every direction creating the effect of a tropical cyclone. His head was spinning, caught in the eye of the storm. Just then he spotted the red beret, bobbing up and down like a buoy in these choppy commuter waters. It floated with the wave of passengers flowing down a tunnel to the right.

Sasha had no choice. He dove into the crowd. He had to reach that musician. He had to retrieve the valuable object that she now had.



## *Meet Me at the Louvre*

“MEET ME AT THE LOUVRE.  
AT OUR WORK. 5 PM.”

David picked up his bag from the X-Ray machine and walked towards the escalator. It was Wednesday 4:45 pm. The Louvre was open late on Wednesday and Friday evenings, time frames that attracted only a fraction of the crowds that paraded through the world-famous museum during the day. Indeed, as David descended into the vast hall, he noticed only a few patrons milling through the basement level. This airy space was cast in beautiful natural light courtesy of the 673 panels of triangular glass overhead.

Added to commemorate the 200-year anniversary of the first French Revolution, Architect I.M. Pei’s controversial Pyramid also served as the new main entrance to the Louvre and created a common entry point to the museum’s three wings. Convenient as this was, it didn’t help David when he reached the bottom of the escalator. Those three wings spread

over 45,000 square meters and contained over 35,000 works of art. Of those thousands of pieces, which ‘work’ was the cryptic text message referring to and in which wing was it found?

David looked right towards the Denon wing. It was home to most of the museum’s blockbuster works. That seemed too predictable. He looked left towards Richelieu. The polar opposite to Denon, it was the museum’s least visited wing. Possibly. Then, with determination, he forged straight ahead towards Sully. The Classics. Yes, that made sense.

He bounded up the short staircase leading to the entrance two steps at a time and removed his ID card from his wallet as he approached the ticket control. The museum was free for European nationals under 26 years old. He took off his backwards baseball cap, lowered his protective face mask and presented his ID to the ticket agent who examined the date, compared his face to the younger version on the card, then waved him on.

The Sully wing occupied the oldest sections of the sprawling former palace of the French royals. Therefore, it fittingly contained many of the museum’s oldest artworks. After a few short turns, David was surrounded by high stone walls. The Louvre was originally constructed as a fortress to guard the western side of a massive defensive wall that King Philippe Auguste built around the city in the late 12th century. From the early 1500s, this fairytale-like castle was gradually torn down to make way for a new Renaissance palace—one which ended up taking four hundred years to complete. When the Pyramid was added in the 1980s, other large scale projects were also undertaken at the Louvre, including digging up much of the space beneath the palace’s courtyards. This was how the impressive remains of the Medieval fortress were rediscovered and subsequently restored.

David now found himself in what was that ancient castle's moat. The space instantly brought back a wave of vivid childhood memories. How many times had he raced down this corridor, imagining what it must have been like back in the Middle Ages? Gazing up at those mammoth towers, he could almost see the valiant knights and archers defending the city from their heights. He also enjoyed hunting down the symbols and initials carved into some of the stones by the workmen who'd built the fortress. This primitive graffiti had left a mark on David in more ways than one.

David followed the walkway around the tall walls until he reached a staircase, which he ascended. A well-preserved Egyptian sphinx stood guard in a fork of the stairs. A left turn would take him to further Pharaonic art, but David turned right. The person he was looking for was more likely in the other section.

At the top of the stairs David found himself amidst a crowd. No, not a hoard of photo-snapping museum-goers, but rather a group of muscular athletes, almighty gods and graceful goddesses. He was in the Department of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Antiquities. Time had not always been kind to these sculptures. Most of them were missing arms, legs, heads or more. The Louvre's most famous 'wounded' work was at the end of the room: the *Venus de Milo*. The refined Greek statue wooed viewers with her delicate perfection and mysterious smile. But instead of returning her grin, David frowned in disappointment. His first hunch turned out to be wrong. The person he was seeking wasn't in front of this 2,100-year-old masterpiece, nor was he anywhere in this entire section.

*Our work? Which work?!* David huffed. All he'd received was that vague text message. David had tried calling him when he'd arrived at the Pyramid, but the line just rang and rang and

finally went to voicemail. His phone was usually on silent mode and even if it wasn't, cell phone reception in certain parts of the museum was patchy, at best. David had no choice but to carry out his search the old-fashioned way; on foot and with his own eyes.

Before leaving the Sully wing, he popped into the Salle des Caryatides. A former royal reception room, it was named after the four female sculptures carved by Jean Goujon in 1550 who appeared to be supporting the musicians' gallery. One could easily imagine a Renaissance ball being held in the elegant room. Today though, gown-clad dancers have been replaced by some of the Louvre's finest Roman copies of Greek sculptures. David knew the person he was looking for immensely loved this room. Despite this, he was nowhere in sight. He was not admiring *Artemis, Goddess of the Hunt*, caught in mid-action, removing an arrow to strike, nor was he marveling at *Sleeping Hermaphroditos*, a dual-sexed mythological character who was resting peacefully in a corner, on an incredibly realistic marble mattress sculpted by Bernini in the 1600s.

Proceeding on his quest, David backtracked and found himself in the long room where the Sully wing merged with the Denon wing. It was home to more sculptures from antiquity, with an eclectic mix of Herculean gladiators, drunken Bacchuses, selfish emperors and oversized stone vases. These gems of the Antiquities culminated at the top of a grand staircase with the monumental *Winged Victory of Samothrace*. The awe-inspiring heroine was poised as if she was about to take flight. Frozen in stone, she would not reach the summits of Mount Olympus, yet, through her impressive fashioning, she had reached the pinnacle of sculptural arts instead.

At the top of a small set of steps to the right, Botticelli's alluring *Venus and the Three Graces* were beckoning David

into the Department of Italian Painting, but before falling to their temptation, he slipped into the Galerie d'Apollon, located on the other side of the *Winged Victory*. He'd read that these opulent rooms had undergone extensive renovations, unveiled just before the lockdown had begun. Now was his chance to see the results of the restoration. Covered from floor to ceiling in gilded carved wood and allegorical paintings created in the 1660s, these sumptuous rooms served as a model for the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. David was more attracted to these rooms' artistry than to the former royal jewels on display.

*Okay, enough with the distractions*, David scolded himself. At this rate, he could easily traipse through most of the museum by its closing time and not even find who he was looking for. He circled back past the *Winged Victory*, and snuck a peek at Botticelli's doe-eyed beauties as he breezed past them and entered *la Grande Galerie*.

It was impossible to not be completely awestruck by this astonishingly long and gorgeous gallery. Conceived between 1595 and 1610, it connected the section of the 'new' Louvre palace, dating from the 1520s to 50s, to the Tuileries, which was an entirely separate palace built in the 1560s by Queen Catherine de Medici. The latter building was tragically ravaged by a fire set by the Revolutionaries of the Commune in 1871 and was subsequently torn down. Practically a museum within a museum, *la Grande Galerie* held many of the Louvre's most renowned paintings, namely those by the Italian masters of the 14th to 17th centuries. Giotto, Ghirlandaio, Mantegna, Raphael, Caravaggio... all of them were talented men, but not the one David was on the hunt for.

The most famous Italian painting in the museum was not hanging in this seemingly endless hall of fame, but in a side

room. David ducked into this and the first thing he heard was a woman calling out: “Oh look, Mabel! There she is!”

‘She’ was none other than *La Gioconda*. Known in English as the *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo da Vinci gifted the small portrait, painted on a board of poplar wood, to the French King Francois I before the artist passed away in 1519. Lisa Gherardini, and her enigmatic smile, have been bewitching viewers for over 500 years; however, her fame has been dramatically amplified in recent years thanks to social media. Bypassing the long line of guests waiting to have a close-up look at the painting, David, in fact, quickened his pace to get out of this manic room as soon as possible. Although it was filled with many overlooked masterpieces, David knew the person he sought would not be in here, he was merely using the room as a convenient shortcut to where he might actually be.

David now found himself in an ornately decorated vestibule which, to fully enjoy, one had to look up. Its ceiling was emblazoned with the depictions of four great rulers of France, chosen to represent the country’s major art movements: Saint-Louis for the Middle Ages, Francois I for the Renaissance, Louis XIV for the Classic period and Napoléon I for the ‘modern’ era. On either side of the vestibule were two galleries, each one containing artworks created in that so-called modern era instigated by Bonaparte. That said, ‘modern’ meant something entirely different to David than these giant paintings. On one side were the emotional Romantic paintings of Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix, like the latter’s legendary painting *Liberty Leading the People*, which paid tribute to the second French Revolution of 1830. On the other were the hyper realistic Neoclassical works by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Jacques-Louis David, which instead honored the Emperor and Imperial values.

David took a minute to scrutinize his namesake's most acclaimed work, *The Coronation of Napoléon*, an excellent example of both Imperial propaganda and 19th-century Photoshop. Completed in 1807, the work restaged the Emperor's 1804 coronation at Notre-Dame and included certain personalities who weren't in attendance at the actual event, like Napoléon's own mother. The audacious artist even sneaked himself into the work, which is what young David liked most about the enormous painting. This cheeky act had possibly influenced him more than David realized. Since the painting was of personal significance, David had thought he might find his target here. Unfortunately, he wasn't sitting in front of the colossal work, nor was he anywhere else in these two large rooms.

He was starting to get impatient. David doubted he'd find him in Denon's other important sculpture room, the Michelangelo Gallery. As its name indicates, it contained the Louvre's two sculptures by the Italian master, *The Rebellious Slave* and *The Dying Slave*. David knew that his target's favorite Michelangelo sculptures were not at the Louvre, but in museums and churches of Florence and Rome. So there was no point in going to that gallery, even if it did have other wonderful works, like Antonio Canova's incredibly romantic *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss*. David sighed and made his way back to the central foyer so he could access the Richelieu wing.

Despite its lower visitor numbers, Richelieu contained some splendid works. David strode up its entrance stairs, flashed his ID card at the bored ticket agent and went down a dimly lit corridor. He rounded a corner and was suddenly bathed in lovely natural light, similar to what he experienced beneath the Pyramid. He'd arrived in la Cour Marly. The space

used to be an outdoor courtyard until it was covered with a glass ceiling during those extensive renovations in the 1980s. The luminous gallery displayed French sculptures from the 17th and 18th centuries originally commissioned for outdoor gardens. The atrium provided the works with a setting akin to their intended homes while also protecting them from the elements. David knew the person he was looking for was extremely fond of the room's star pieces, the *Horses of Marly* by Guillaume Coustou. However, David's thorough check of the room's many nooks was yet another flop.

His frustration was mounting. How was he supposed to miraculously *guess* which work the message had been referring to? He was about to throw in the towel when he had a hunch. *Ah ha!* Which way would be the fastest to get there?

He took the stairs on the left and found himself in the Napoléon III Apartments. Now, David was quite sure his target wouldn't be in these glamorous state apartments designed for this subsequent Emperor's high level entertaining, but he was using them as another useful shortcut. At the end of the series of rooms, opulently decked out in red velour drapery and seating, huge gilded mirrors and dazzling crystal chandeliers, was a staircase going up.

A few minutes later David arrived in the spacious room completely dedicated to the Medici Cycle, 24 paintings by Peter Paul Rubens commissioned by Marie de Medici and depicting the Queen's life and 'struggles.' David shook his head. *Struggles?* What did that queen know about life's difficulties? What did she know about the social problems of the time? He put his grudges and lofty idealism on the side and returned his focus to the room. Even though he personally didn't like the topic of these paintings, David had to admit that Rubens was an amazingly gifted artist. It was a shame, so few

visitors made it over to this part of the museum to enjoy these works. And today, this was an even bigger shame... because the person he was looking for was not among the handful of guests who were currently in this room!

David collapsed onto a bench. *Now where?* David gazed helplessly up at the work in front of him. Entitled *The Education of the Princess*, it illustrates how Marie—*supposedly*—received divine education from the gods Apollo, Athena and Hermes. David hadn't received any divine intervention from the multitude of gods he'd passed on today's trek through the museum, that was for sure!

Education. David's eyes traveled to the bottom of the painting where there was a Greek style bust lying on the ground. Something about it spoke to him. No, the person he was looking for hadn't been among those Greek and Roman sculptures. However, there were other sculpted figures throughout the museum... and it was true, one in particular had indeed played a role in David's own education. This line of thinking gave David a new idea. *Of course! Why hadn't I thought of that before?*

David raced out of the room and rushed down a marble staircase. He weaved through more French sculptures, this time from Middle Ages through the Renaissance, and ended up in rooms showcasing the works of ancient Mesopotamia. He skirted past *The Code of Hammurabi* and through the stunning gateway in the Cour Khorsabad, featuring gigantic human-headed winged bulls carved in the 8th century B.C.E.

These were another childhood favorite of David's. The mythical creatures had not only enlivened his imagination, they had also opened his eyes to the world and its many diverse cultures. He actually knew little about his own heritage. His father was a rare pure Parisian, whose ancestors were likely

among the troublesome Revolutionaries who'd burned down the Tuileries palace. However, his mom's background was more cosmopolitan. Her great grandfather had been a Senegalese *Tirailleur*, a rifleman who'd fought for France in WWI. Thanks to his sharpshooting skills, he made it through the gruesome war alive. When he was discharged at the end of the War, he decided to stay on in France rather than make the arduous journey home. With each new generation, fewer and fewer stories from 'back home' were passed down. This might be part of the reason David tended to cast aside everything from the past and instead look firmly towards the future.

He sped through a series of rooms containing more pieces recovered from historic sites in the Middle East and entered one filled with fragile artworks protected inside glass cases. Scanning the room, his eyes came to a sudden halt at a case in the far corner. *Bingo!*

David walked towards the case and stopped. He put his hands on his hips and loudly cleared his throat. This succeeded in getting the attention of the man seated in front of him. He turned to face David and his eyes instantly lit up.

"Oh, there you are, David. Better late than never."

"Well, you weren't exactly specific about *where* we were supposed to meet!" David said exasperated.

"I knew you would find me," answered the fifty-something-year-old before returning his gaze to the object in his hands.

"But Dad, I've had to roam through the whole museum in order to find you!" David exclaimed.

"Good, I'm sure the museum was happy to have you back," he replied with a sly smile.

*Hey wait a second*, thought David, struck by another realization. *Seriously?* This had all been a ploy? Yes. That's exactly what he'd connivingly intended all along. That sneak!

David looked back down at his dad. He was sitting on one of those small folding stools, sketchbook in hand.

“I miss the good ol’ days, when we used to come sketching together,” his dad commented wistfully. “I really wish you hadn’t dropped out of art school, David.”

“I don’t go by David anymore. Remember?? It’s D-Zyne now, *Deeee Z-eye-ne*,” he corrected. “That place wasn’t teaching me anything I couldn’t learn on my own. I don’t need an institution telling me what is or isn’t art. I’m much more creative doing my own style of art.”

“I’m not really sure you can call that spray paint stuff ‘art,’ but if you insist...” David was noticeably irritated by his dad’s reply. Sensing he’d gone a little too far, he added; “But that doesn’t matter, I’m just happy to see you.”

David’s stance was softened by his dad’s pale grey eyes. He hadn’t seen him since before the lockdown. They’d gotten into a big argument last year when his dad found out David hadn’t re-enrolled in art college. But that was last year, a lot had happened since then. Maybe he shouldn’t be so hard on him, he meant well after all. That said, David was sick of getting into these art debates with him. His dad was a staunch classicist and David didn’t really see the point in copying all this old art. David had swapped oil paints for spray cans and stretched canvases for building walls. For him, street art was real art. Today’s art.

“This is where it all started. This is where I first brought you, all those years ago.”

David looked at his dad’s sketchbook. On the page was a simplistic figure, armless, just like the *Venus de Milo*.

“Maybe you don’t remember that far back, you were only three or four. But I wanted to start with the beginning, with this work, the Ain Ghazal statue, the oldest artwork in the Louvre.

Can you believe it's 9,000 years old? Although, humans have been using their creativity and making art for much longer than that; since the dawn of time. We can move forward into the future, David, but we should never forget the past."

As much as he'd done it begrudgingly, David had to admit, he'd actually enjoyed his trek through the museum. It brought back so many memories and at the same time had also reminded him why he'd become an artist; why he'd followed in his father's footsteps. It was nice to be back... and it was nice to see his dad. So much of humanity had stood the test of time. David felt as invincible as those gladiators and the other heroes he'd just viewed. However, he was not invincible, and his dad was even less so. Even if they didn't agree on what constituted art, it could still bring them closer together once again.

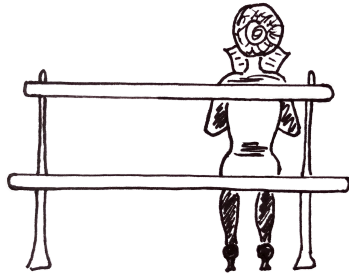
"Next time I could bring another sketchbook and folding stool? I was thinking of some Greek art. How about the *Venus de Milo*? Are you free next Wednesday, same time?"

"I'll think about it," he replied, not wanting to sound too keen. "But if I do come, don't be expecting me to change my style or anything."

"Fair enough." Replied his dad, extended the pencil in his outstretched hand. David shook it. This substitute handshake sealed the deal.

David looked down at his dad's drawing and the back up at Ain Ghazal statue. Damaged by time and the elements, it was modern in its own way.

This got the wheels turning in David's head. *Perhaps the new and old could coexist?*



## *In Search of Lost Time at the Palais-Royal and Galerie Vivienne*

Although it varied slightly depending on the time of the year, the colonnade's series of repeating shadows always slanted in the same direction in the morning. Capucine preferred to see this sight, one she'd taken in daily for the last 30 odd years, in this particular light.

Well, almost daily. If it were raining cats and dogs, she'd forgo her morning ritual. And there were those few short holidays she and Robert had taken, once to the French Riviera (too hot), and another to Belgium (too cold). Well, then there were all those months at the hospital, but she didn't like thinking about them.

It took exactly 262 steps to get there. One day she'd counted. 262 steps from the door of her apartment, down the stairs (luckily, she only lived on the second floor), along Rue de la Banque, right into the Galerie Vivienne, then to the left to reach Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs. She would then have to wait for a gap in the steady stream of traffic so she could cross over and duck into the hidden Passage des Deux Pavillons. She

then had to go down its set of steps, across quiet Rue de Beaujolais, and through the iron gate, minding the little step, which was worn down in a gentle curve after centuries of foot traffic.

A further eight steps would take her to the Galerie Beaujolais, the northernmost covered arcade of the Palais-Royal. On a grey day the play of light was less remarkable, but on this late September day, the soft morning sunlight created a domino effect cascading down the full length of the passageway. However, just because she'd entered le Palais-Royal, it didn't mean she'd arrived at her final destination. She still had 27 more steps to go.

Originally built in the 1630s for Cardinal Richelieu, King Louis XIII's prime minister, the Palais-Royal was expanded over the years, particularly in the late 1700s when the regal residence's private gardens were boxed in by buildings and these columned arcades. Visiting the tranquil space today, one could hardly imagine it was once the bustling heart of Parisian shopping and entertainment, which had since shifted to around the Opera Garnier.

Struck by the sun's rays, Capucine squinted as she stepped into the enclosed gardens. After some initial trial and error, she'd come to the conclusion that 11 am was the perfect time of day to come. This would spare her the lunchtime sandwich eaters, the mid-afternoon kids let loose from school and the *apéro* hour *pétanque* players (French 'bocce ball').

The only time of year when the pretty park was uncharacteristically busy in the morning, was late winter when the magnolia blossoms popped out. But this was a relatively new phenomenon. In recent years during that two-week period she'd noticed a considerable upswing of people, fancy 'smartphones' in hand, taking an absurd amount of photos. She

didn't really understand what all the fuss was about. When the subject had come up last year during one of the few conversations she had with fellow park-goers, apparently those thousands of photos went onto a thing called 'Instagrın' or something like that. Anyway, the oohing and aahing photographers usually descended upon the park in the afternoon, so she wasn't all that bothered by this brief invasion.

Five steps from her destination, suddenly Capucine froze. There was something seriously wrong.

There was *someone* on her bench.

She stood there, as rigid as the manicured trees which lined the garden. Her already squinting eyes were reduced to tiny arrow hole slits through which she was launching a barrage of poisonous evil eyes. Her defensive efforts seemed to have absolutely no effect on the abominable 'invader.'

After what seemed like an eternity, the intruder finally noticed Capucine.

"*Bonjour Madame!*" He greeted her cheerfully.

Capucine intensified her war stance.

"Would you like to take a seat?" suggested the young man, looking over at the rest of the bench. There was clearly ample room on it for this little old lady, much more than the meter required with the new social distancing rules. Nevertheless, he slid over to the very edge of the bench and made a 'Vanna White' arm gesture, matched with an equally gleaming smile, over at the vast space available to her. Capucine didn't budge.

"What a lovely day!" he said as he loudly inhaled the crisp morning air. "The park is splendid in autumn, don't you think?"

*No!* Capucine thought. *It isn't splendid at all with this obtrusive man on my bench!*

"I almost prefer the park at this time of year," he continued nonchalantly. "Springtime is also nice, however, in the past few

years the magnolia blossoms have been attracting way too many people!”

“I couldn’t agree more!” The statement popped out of her mouth before she realized what had happened. She couldn’t ‘consort’ with the enemy!

“What’s the point of taking all those photographs, when you can sit here, on this lovely bench, and simply savor their beauty,” he said with another wave of his arm, this time up in the air from his seated vantage point. Capucine couldn’t help but follow his gesture up towards those magnolia branches. It was true, her bench was perfectly positioned to enjoy them and, actually, the whole north end of the park.

Capucine scrunched up her toes. Even if she was going just ‘to the park,’ she still wore her pumps. She was only meant to walk 262 steps, then she would be sitting down. Standing on these uneven pebbles was not part of her usual routine! She took a few steps forward in order to relieve her cramped toes.

“Have you noticed that the leaves on the chestnut trees are starting to turn?” he went on, pointing up at the branches, seemingly oblivious to Capucine’s displeasure and discomfort.

She turned around to check, but with her bad knees she wasn’t able to crouch down enough to get the right angle. She had no choice but to sit down on the bench so she could see what he was referring to.

“No, those aren’t chestnut trees, they’re lindens,” she corrected.

“Ah okay, thank you!” he said without acknowledging that Capucine had finally sat down next to him. “I grew up in an apartment, so I don’t know my trees very well.”

“So did I, but it’s something you can learn,” she said curtly.

“Yes, that’s true,” he replied thoughtfully. “Like the saying goes: ‘we can learn something new every day’!”

“I suppose so, but once you pass 80, those little details don’t seem to matter much anymore.”

“Eighty?! But *Madame*, you don’t look a day over 65!” he proclaimed sincerely. She pretended not to be flattered, however, her glacial frown was defrosting and her dagger eyes had retreated.

“My name’s Lucas,” he took the liberty of introducing himself.

“Lucas?” she questioned. “I assumed your name would be... different.”

“Born and raised in *la Region Parisienne, Madame...*”

“Madame Dubois.”

“Madame Dubois, *enchanté!* It’s a pleasure to meet you!”

*Well, at least he had good manners despite growing up in the suburbs,* Capucine thought to herself.

“Do you work in a restaurant around here or something?” she asked, nodding her head in the direction of the two Michelin-starred establishments on the north side of the park.

“No, no. I’m quite fond of Le Grand Véfour, but I don’t work in the restaurant business,” replied Lucas, unfazed by her presumptuous question. “I actually run a bookshop.”

“You run a bookshop?” she said, surprised yet trying not to seem too interested.

“Yes, it’s nearby. I needed some fresh air, so I came to the park for a short break.”

“Which bookshop?” She quizzed. “I’ve lived here in the district since, well, since long before you were born... in *la region Parisienne.*”

“You’ll surely know it then,” replied Lucas. “*A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, the bookshop at the end of the Galerie Vivienne.”

“*A La Recherche du Temps Perdu?*” she repeated, taken aback. “Yes, I know it. I know it very well.” She added after a moment of silence. Capucine turned her gaze back towards the garden. *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. In Search of Lost Time. That’s what Capucine now spent most of her days doing.

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It had been hard losing Robert. They’d been married for 51 years. Even though he hadn’t been overly affectionate, he was a good man. He’d spent his whole career working at the Central Post Office, a colossal building located a few blocks away. As a *fonctionnaire*, a French civil servant, he qualified for an HLM, *un habitation à loyer modéré*, a state sponsored apartment with low rent, otherwise they would never have been able to afford to live where they did, right in the heart of the city.

They’d had a simple, yet happy life. They had two kids, a boy and a girl. They were both good students. They went to university, got jobs, got their own apartments, got married... got on with their own lives.

After their children moved out, although Capucine still had the household to manage and meals to prepare, she suddenly had a lot more time on her hands. She ended up occupying these extra hours with reading, a new passion which came about rather by accident.

She usually did her errands along la Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, where one could find a bakery, greengrocer’s, butcher’s and other small shops. To reach it, she would always take the shortcut through the Galerie Vivienne, the same route she would later take to the Palais-Royal. However, one morning, it must have been in 1988 or 1989, she had an appointment close to the Opera Garnier, so instead of turning

left down the main section of the Galerie Vivienne, she turned right.

Admittedly, she knew there were some other stores at the far end of the early 19th-century shopping gallery, but since she rarely went that way, she'd hardly given them any notice. As she reached the end of the passageway and descended its small staircase, her purse caught something resulting in a loud clatter behind her.

Whipping around Capucine was mortified to see a dozen or so books strewn across the Galerie's beautiful mosaic-tiled floor.

"*Mon dieu!*" she exclaimed, bending down to pick up the books.

"Please, don't trouble yourself!" called a man's voice from inside the shop. "Let me get those."

In an instant the owner of the voice swooped down to collect the fallen books. As she looked up, Capucine's gaze met a set of piercing blue eyes, hovering a mere few inches away from her own.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Capucine, her cheeks flaring as she hopped up and turned away in an attempt to mask her embarrassment. "If I damaged any of the books, I would happily pay for them."

"There won't be any need for that, *Madame*," he assured her. "These are used books which have already been knocked about a good deal during their lifetime. They only cost a few francs each... but the entertainment they provide is priceless."

Capucine dared let her eyes meander over to the stack of books in his hands. The title *Au Bonheur des Dames* jumped out at her.

"Ahh, a classic Zola!" enthused the bookseller, noticing her shifting gaze to the cover of *The Ladies' Delight*.

“How much is it?” she asked.

“Eight francs,” he replied upon checking the amount written in pencil inside the front cover. Capucine rummaged through her handbag. She pulled out her change purse, but was dismayed to find that it contained only a few *centimes*.

“I’m afraid I only have large notes on me, but I live nearby, I will come back another time for the book.”

“Please, take it now!” he implored, forcing the book into her hands. “Someone else might have bought it by the time you return. You can pay for it the next time you’re passing this way.”

“But, but, but...”

“I insist!”

“That’s very kind of you, Mr...”

“Swann, Mr Swann,” he answered.

“Very well, Mr Swann, *à très bientôt*. See you very soon.” she said, then she gave a courteous nod and carried on her way.

“With pleasure, *Madame*. With pleasure!”

That very afternoon Capucine dove into the book. The hours flew by as she devoured Zola’s riveting prose. It took the fading afternoon light to startle her out of her literary trance. Robert would be home soon, she’d better get down to making dinner. The time-consuming *boeuf bourguignon* she’d intended on making would have to wait for another night.

The next day she couldn’t resist returning to her book, but she immediately felt guilty. *I should really go and pay Mr Swann for it*, she thought. Capucine didn’t like having debts. Before sliding on her coat and pumps, she found herself in front of her dressing table, applying some lipstick, sprucing up her hair and spritzing on a dash of perfume. *Was this really necessary to go around the block... to a bookstore?* She called herself out. *Well, it never hurts to be at one’s best.*

Capucine couldn't explain it, but her heart rate quickened as she walked under the passageway's glass roof in the direction of the shop. Yesterday she'd been too flustered to see what it was called, so when she arrived in front of the bookstore, she craned her neck up at its sign: *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Even someone not very literarily minded, like herself, knew the title of Marcel Proust's epic seven-volume saga, obviously the inspiration for the shop's name.

The little tinkle of the bells hanging on the door handle announced Capucine's arrival.

"*Ah! Bonjour Madame!*" Mr Swann greeted, raising his head from a book. "How nice to see you again so soon!" Capucine blushed. She glanced around the shop in an effort to avoid Mr Swann's sparkling eyes. All around her were hundreds if not thousands of books. The ones that lined the upper bookshelves had worn leather spines, these must be the more precious ones. Whereas on the tables and in the bins were the used, modern paperbacks.

"I hope you are enjoying the Zola," he said, regaining Capucine's attention.

"Oh yes, it's an excellent book, which I must duly pay you for," she said. She pulled out her change purse and placed precisely eight francs on the counter.

"Thank you for your promptness," he said, putting the money in the till. "Isn't it a lovely day?"

"Why, yes. Now that you mention it, spring is decidedly in the air," replied Capucine, trying to remain formal.

"You could take your book to the park," suggested Mr Swann.

"That isn't a bad idea," thought Capucine. *Le Jardin du Palais-Royal* was so close, yet she hadn't spent much time there since the children were little. Tucked away within those

buildings it was so quiet, plus it had plenty of benches. It was the ideal setting to read in peace while also enjoying the balmy weather.

“Be sure to come back when you need a new book, *Madame...*” Mr Swann’s sentence trailing off as he fished for her name.

“Madame Dubois.”

“Happy reading, Madame Dubois!”

And so began Capucine’s daily trips to le Palais-Royal. She always went at 11 am and always sat on the same bench, the one which she had carefully staked out. While Robert was still working, these outings were reserved for Monday to Friday, however, when he retired she added the weekend. She only shortened her Sunday sessions if the kids and their families were coming over for lunch. Even when she babysat her grandchildren during their school holidays, she kept up her routine, bringing them along with her to play in the park while she read, always with a watchful eye in their direction.

Her voracious new appetite for literature needed to be fed and Capucine could be found at least once a week at *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. She continued to remain cordially formal to Mr Swann, but her fondness for him was growing with her rapidly expanding collection of books.

Of course this ‘crush’ was absurd. She was a married woman, after all. She loved Robert and was entirely faithful, nevertheless, she couldn’t debate Camus with him. Mr Swann had first turned her to literature and then succeeded in broadening her scope. After a few years, Capucine slowly left behind Hugo, Sand and Flaubert to enter the 20th century.

“With all the time you’re spending in the Palais-Royal, it’s really high time you read some Colette!” declared Mr Swann many years later.

“Why is that?”

“The writer lived in le Palais-Royal, I think in the 1920s,” Mr Swann elaborated. “She wrote about it in her book *Trois... Six...Neuf*.”

“Do you have it in stock?”

“Let me take a look,” he said, scanning his tables. By now Capucine knew how the shop’s collections were organized, but she secretly loved how Mr Swann’s face transformed as he concentrated, brow furrowed, in search of a particular title.

“You’re in luck!” He beamed, producing a worn book with curled page corners.

*Six...Neuf*. Six.... Nine. No, these specific numbers had brought no ‘luck’ at all to Capucine. When she turned 69, her husband, then 72, was diagnosed with cancer. Despite his prognosis, he remained upbeat. It was now the 21st century! They had fancy new treatments these days. The doctors would surely be able to help him. And they did. For a time.

Naturally, during Robert’s health concerns Capucine put her hobby on hold. When Robert went into remission after his first chemo treatments, he seemed strong enough for Capucine to have some time for herself, nonetheless, she couldn’t bear to go to the bookshop. Not now.

Sadly though, eight months later Robert’s condition had worsened and he was admitted to the hospital. Things weren’t looking good and any veils of optimism had been pushed aside.

“Read to me,” murmured Robert after they’d spent the first few days in painful silence, save for the regular visits of the overly perky nurses.

“Excuse me?” Capucine asked, puzzled by his request.

“Read to me,” he said, raising his voice to a more audible level. “Why don’t you read me one of those books you always have your nose in.”

And so they spent the next five weeks in the company of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Le Père Goriot* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Robert took his last breaths during *Les Misérables*, Capucine by his side, like Cosette was to Jean Valjean.

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One day, in the weeks that followed, Capucine found a small, thick package in her mailbox. As she carefully opened it, a book and folded letter slid out.

*Chère Madame Dubois,  
Une pensée pour vous. / A little thought for you.  
~ C. Swann*

She turned over the book to read its title: *Voyage au bout de la nuit. Journey to the End of the Night* by Céline.

News of Robert's passing must have spread around *le quartier*. Although it had never been discussed, she was quite sure she'd caught Mr Swann looking down at her left hand on one of her first visits to the shop. He therefore knew she was married and never made any advances, despite the spark that continued to flicker between them. She was touched by his thoughtful gesture, but she was not ready to fill her heart with her favorite pleasure, anything or *anyone* else, just yet.

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“Madame Dubois, it's been ages!” exclaimed Mr Swann when he looked up to find Capucine at the door of his shop. “I've been worried about you!”

Almost a year had gone by since Robert's diagnosis and her last visit to the shop. Although Capucine wasn't finished mourning, she had finally got around to Mr Swann's touching gift, which reignited her desire to read.

This didn't mean she was completely ready to go back to living. She took her time. Now and then, Mr Swann's passionate descriptions of the book he was encouraging her to read brought a look of joy to Capucine's face. On another visit, she even laughed. The two of them seemed to be getting closer and closer, however, as the years passed, neither took that extra step in the other's direction. No invitation for lunch or coffee. No suggestion to meet up at *her* bench in the Palais-Royal.

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"Mr Swann is missed by many," Capucine eventually managed to say after several minutes staring at the linden trees.

"Yes, he was a fine man," said Lucas. "His sudden death was a shock to us all."

"The worst was not being able to say goodbye," added Capucine, somewhat misty-eyed. Capucine had been one of the lucky ones, one of the few elderly who'd not been hit by the virus. Her children had forced her to stay indoors and had even arranged to have groceries and the occasional meal delivered right to her door. She'd terribly missed her outings to the park and to *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, but knew it was in her best interest to stay home. Mr Swann, who couldn't be kept from his beloved shop, even if it was not open during the lockdown, did not meet the same fate.

"You know, I think I remember seeing you in the shop once," said Lucas.

"Oh really?" she answered dubiously.

“I did a three-month internship with Mr Swann while I was working on my Master’s,” explained Lucas. “It must have been five or six years ago. My uncle’s a Tunisian poet, so I had started doing my dissertation on poetry, however, during my time at the shop, Mr Swann slyly converted me to 20th-century French literature. In the mornings I spent my time researching at the library and in the afternoons I worked at the bookshop. One day I arrived early, actually around this time of day. Mr Swann was so enraptured in conversation that he didn’t even notice me come in. He was talking to a smartly dressed woman, about your height, who was holding a copy of Marguerite Duras’s *The Lover*.”

The memory hit Capucine as hard as Quasimodo ringing the bells of Notre Dame.

Yes. At one point, around five years ago, Mr Swann *had* tried to drop stronger hints of his admiration. This was done in true Mr Swann style, through a series of ‘romantic’ book suggestions which culminated in Duras’ *The Lover*. Mr Swann had just finished a fervent introduction to the book and was about to say something else, something that seemed important to him, when he was interrupted by a cough coming from the direction of the shop’s entrance. Mr Swann and Capucine swung around to find a young man standing meekly at the door and the moment was lost. Forever.

Capucine was indeed extremely fond of Mr Swann, but she really didn’t know how to handle the situation. She didn’t know if she was capable of loving him, of loving anyone but Robert. So she avoided the shop for a few weeks and when she did return, Mr Swann pretended as if nothing had ever happened.

“It was during my internship that I got to know Mr Swann and fall in love with his shop,” said Lucas.

“It’s good to know his memory and his shop will live on, through you,” said Capucine. “You seem like a fine young man.” She added, the hostility she unrightfully displayed to him at the beginning of their encounter had vanished.

“I will do my best,” he pledged. “The shop has stayed pretty much the same, but I’ve expanded with some non-fiction and some art books. We’ve just received a great new release on women artists of the 19th century, in case the topic could be of interest.”

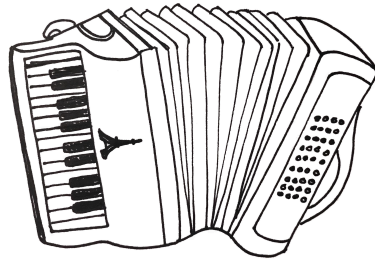
“No, thank you. I think I’ll stick to literature.”

“Well, we definitely have plenty of that, so I expect to see you soon!”

Capucine gazed around her park. Maybe the leaves on the linden trees were turning. She thought about the 262 steps it took to get here, and the 148 steps it took to get to the shop. She had spent too much precious energy, these past months, these past years, in search of lost time. She could not rewrite the volumes of her life, but she could turn over a new page.

“With pleasure, Lucas, with pleasure.”





## *Le Métro*

### *3rd, 4th Arrondissements & the Seine*

*Ah ha! There she is.*

Sasha could see her red beret bouncing through the crowd up ahead. He just needed to catch up with her. Then he'd calmly explain that something incredibly important had been amongst the coins he'd just tossed into her pouch. Heck. If she seemed reluctant to give it back, he was more than willing to give her some extra money in exchange for it. Anything she wanted. The object she had was priceless.

She hopped up a staircase to reach the platform of Line 1. He wasn't that far behind her, however, she spryly reached the top of the steps well before he'd even set foot on the bottom. Her agility was certainly in part owing to her youth, but also in part thanks to all the time she must spend in the *Métro*. It wasn't like Sasha was very old, he just didn't take the *Métro* nearly as much as he used to. His current fatigue also slowed him down.

When he was halfway up the stairs, Sasha heard an all too familiar sound—the whooshing of an approaching Line 1 train.

*Darn!* Sasha cursed. He'd been hoping to catch the musician before she got on the next train and started playing again. He scrambled to get to the top of the steps. A sleek, modern train soared past his line of sight. It sent a gust of air down the stairs, making it even harder to climb up the last few steps. Sasha reached the platform as the green and white train came to a smooth halt at the far end. This was roughly where he spotted the musician and her red beret. *Boy, she was fast!*

Sasha knew he wouldn't have time to reach her, especially since so many commuters had disembarked onto the platform and were now blocking his way. However, he wasn't too worried. Line 1 trains weren't divided up into carriages, like the older trains found on many of the other lines, including Line 7, the line they'd just been on. Sasha could walk all the way through the train to reach the musician 'entertaining' at the other end.

The doors snapped shut and the train set off, the force of which sent Sasha shuffling back a few steps. He grabbed hold of a pole to steady himself. With his two feet now firmly on the floor of the train, he tried to take his first step forward. Gravity would have it otherwise. *Geez! This was like trekking through the Sahara during a windstorm!* Maybe it was going to be trickier to walk through the train to reach her than Sasha'd previously imagined.

By the time he made it past the first section of seats, he was getting the hang of this desert walking. Sasha looked on ahead. Sure enough there she was. The musician, whom he likened as a *petite* Piaf, was singing her heart out at the front of the train.

"Louvre-Rivoli — Louvre-Rivoli," announced the automatic recording as they neared the next station. The train's speed suddenly reduced. Sasha was thrown backwards, skimming a nearby Spanish-speaking couple holding souvenir

bags from the Louvre. He regained his footing when the train stopped at the platform. Sasha was about to take another step forward when the doors flung open and a boisterous group of school children piled on. They were around nine or ten years old and were clutching art activity booklets. Like the Spaniards, they too must have just been at the Louvre.

As much as he thought fostering a love of art in children was a good thing, these museum-going kiddos had created a 10-meter barricade ahead of Sasha. They were children. He was not comfortable pushing past them. Plus, with everyone being attentive to social distancing, his quest was made all the more difficult.

The next station was Châtelet, a much dreaded, yet incredibly useful station. Five of Paris's 16 *Métro* lines and three of its five *RER* lines (the Réseau Express Régional, suburban trains) met at the twin Châtelet-Les-Halles station. This made it not only Paris's largest subway station, but the largest subway interchange station in the world. A whopping 750,000 travelers passed through it every weekday.

As they neared the station, Sasha had two simultaneous, but contrasting, wishes: that the kids would get off there and that the singer would **not** get off. It would be virtually impossible to find her if she got a head start into this station's insane maze of tunnels which somehow connected all those different *Métro* and *RER* lines. As they stopped at Châtelet, one of his wishes came true. The other did not. The musician was still on the train, but so were the kids.

The train hurtled on. Sasha tried to shimmy around the excitable students and their order-shouting teachers. He'd made little progress by the time the train pulled up to the next station, Hôtel-de-Ville. Outside of this station was Paris's central city hall, which governed all of the 20 arrondissements. Notre-

Dame Cathedral was also not far. He highly doubted the students would be getting off here, they didn't look like they were on an all-day sightseeing trip of the city.

*"There's only one Paris... !"* Sasha could vaguely hear Petite Piaf's words above the brouhaha of the school group.

The train pursued on its journey east. Above their heads were the beautiful, tranquil streets of the Marais, so much calmer than where Sasha was currently stuck. After Saint-Paul station the train's speed slowed and the track curved. They were approaching Bastille station. *Could the rambunctious kids get off there, please?* Sasha silently begged.

This time it looked like his wishes would be granted... or at least one of them.

As the kids' chaotically tumbled off the train at Bastille, so did the singer. In a flash, she darted into a stairwell that was right in front of her.

*Noooo!* cried Sasha, unable to believe his misfortune. He instinctively jumped off the train and managed to skirt past the students while their teachers were herding them together. He jetted down the stairs. Bastille station had two other lines. *Which one was she heading for?*

Sasha barreled down the steps and rounded a corner. Where was that red beret? The performer could have taken a variety of passageways. Straight ahead was a long corridor that led to Bastille's two other lines, numbers 5 and 8. That would make the most sense. But just as he was about to join the flock of other commuters heading that way, something colorful caught his eye to the left. It bopped down some steps. *The red beret!*

There was no signage above the stairwell, so it must be the exit staircase for a platform. When commuters took certain *Métro* lines frequently, they eventually got to know these shortcuts. Sure enough, as Sasha descended the steps, he found

himself on the southbound platform of Line 5. On any other day he would have been tempted to take the short detour over to the other platform to have a look at the historic details it contained. Beneath some information panels were large stones marking the former location of la Bastille. The rest of the stones of the formidable fortress and symbol of the first French Revolution had long since disappeared from the site. As fascinating as these were, today Sasha had no time for such leisurely pursuits.

As he was craning his neck up to see where the musician had gone, he heard the screeching tires of the train. A moment later it rounded the corner and came into the station. *Darn!* Petite Piaf had already make it far down the platform. He'd hop onto the train wherever it pulled up. Like Line 1, the number 5 also had newer trains without separate carriages. Despite this similarity, Line 5 didn't seem to go as fast as the driverless, automatic number 1. With the practice he'd done on the previous train, Sasha was confident he could catch up to her rather quickly this time around.

The train left Bastille station and journeyed beneath the southern Marais. Sasha didn't waste any time. He immediately set off down the train in the direction of the musician. Sasha's confidence was further bolstered by the virtually empty train. *Excellent!* He should reach her, if not at the next station, certainly by the following one. In fact, he'd already walked through almost a quarter of the train and now he could make out some of the words to her signature song.

*“Il n'y a qu'un seul Paris...”*

The train started climbing and soon they were above ground at the Quai de la Rapée station. Sitting in an obscure

location right on the banks of the Seine River, it was certainly one of the least frequented stations on the *Métro*'s vast network of 302 stations. Just as the doors next to Sasha were about to close, two long pointy objects entered the train. Two athletic types followed, hopping onto the train just as the doors slammed shut behind them. *Rowers?* There must be a rowing club somewhere nearby down on the River's banks. Proud of being able to catch that train, the two sportsmen gave each other a 'high five' with their oars. *There's nothing celebratory about this!* thought Sasha angrily. How was he supposed to get around this new obstacle!

The *Métro* left the station and sailed along an iron bridge high above the water. Sasha would have normally enjoyed looking out at the pretty view one could admire on this stretch of Line 5, however, he was too busy trying to navigate his way around the rowers. When they saw him approaching, they clumsily tried to move their gigantic oars at the same time, this only made matters worse. The oars were caught in bars of the *Métro* pole! Sasha felt like he was stuck in the middle of a jousting match!

While this skirmish was still very much underway, the train arrived at Austerlitz station. Although he was busy battling it out with the cavalier rowers, Sasha noticed something red hopping off the train. *Why was she getting off here?!* There weren't many people on the train, perhaps she hadn't made much money on her first song?

Sasha struggled to escape the lance-oars. He broke free and luckily got off the train just before the doors slammed shut. He spotted the red beret capering down some steps. Where could she be going now?