The Perils of Travel

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Abstract
Something that unnerves me when I fly on certain European airlines is the way that passengers will applaud at touchdown, as if a crash landing were the norm, so an uneventful landing is a cause for celebration.

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*Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?*
—Elizabeth Bishop, “Questions of Travel”

Something that unnerves me when I fly on certain European airlines is the way that passengers will applaud at touchdown, as if a crash landing were the norm, so an uneventful landing is a cause for celebration.

On most U.S. domestic flights I’ve taken, safe touchdown is so thoroughly assumed that passengers are out of their seats, threading their arms through coat sleeves and eyeing the overhead compartments even as the plane’s back tires screech down. The cabin crew urges over the intercom, “Please stay in your seats! The captain has not turned off the fasten seat belts sign.”

But on several European flights I’ve taken, conversation hushes at descent. Greeks, Russians sit up straight, look forward, spread their hands flat on their armrests. Are they thinking of loved ones or concentrating on keeping the plane in the air, as I am? Once we hear the concussion of the back tires on the tarmac, the cabin comes alive with applause. Passengers turn to each other and smile. They nod their heads at each other as if to say, “That was good, not? Again, we did not crash.”

Perhaps I’ve imagined all this. Perhaps international flights are just traumatic for me, an American, because they remind me of how much farther away from home I’m taking myself, which forces the natural question—if I die abroad who will repatriate my body? Will it be my new boyfriend, my ex-husband, my mother, or some odd combination of all three working together? I imagine them collaborating, making travel plans on the phone after they’ve called each other to deliver the news of my demise. But how will they even find each other without my address book?

Will my ex-husband and my boyfriend travel together to pick up my body, my mother being too old and fearful of new places to go herself, and my new boyfriend being too new and too aggrieved to travel by himself? I imagine them sitting together on the flight—my new boyfriend and my ex-husband—two gorgeous dark-haired, dark-eyed men...
accepting their hot hand towels, their complimentary glasses of champagne, flirting, perhaps, with the flight attendant. How dare they! And on the way to pick up my body. It makes me want to live, just to deprive them of the experience.

*Americans are rather like bad Bulgarian wine: they don’t travel well.*

—Bernard Falk

Some travelers, I have observed, take the earliest opportunity to imperil themselves when they arrive at their destinations. The bag is barely unpacked before they must climb the highest bell tower or ride the shaky tram suspended by frayed cables to the peak of the nearest mountain. They must take the creaking elevator to the top of the Eiffel Tower, or huff up the three hundred odd steps, cobbled together in the 16th century, we are assured, by the finest of Europe’s masons, to the lean tip of the ancient cathedral. They must stand in the crumbling eye of the wind-blown spire and, if that’s not enough, step out onto the shaky platform with no guard-rails. I’ve never had such a desire when traveling.

On my first trip to Paris, I unwittingly enlisted myself in a perilous adventure with Scott, a fellow American I met at my hotel, the Grand Hotel Des Balcons. I suppose it was the sadness I observed in him each morning as he ate his 50 franc breakfast, cracking his hard-boiled egg, spooning his yogurt so thoughtfully, and reading a book in English, I noticed, which first made me aware that he was likely an American.

When I saw him days later, walking along the rue Casimir-Delavigne with that same English novel tucked under the sleeve of his brown corduroy jacket, I felt compelled to stop him and introduce myself. We talked like old friends on that windy street, just off the busy St-Germain-des-Pres, and discovered that we were both writers—he, from the West coast; me, from the Midwest.

In minutes, we disclosed a great deal about ourselves, as travelers and Americans tend to do, and especially as traveling Americans do. I liked him immediately and found it a relief to speak to someone in fluent English after ten days by myself in Paris during which time I had communicated mostly with hand gestures—exaggerated facial movements, and confusing English fragments, which I delivered in what I thought to be a French accent. I don’t know why I began speaking
broken English with a French accent as soon as I arrived in Paris. But it only seemed that my English was better understood when I did so.

Talking with Scott on the sidewalk outside our hotel, it seemed exhilarating to be gushing English to someone and to have someone gushing English back to me. I liked him, but I wasn’t attracted to him. Not in that way you imagine you might someday be attracted to someone you meet when you’re traveling and unsupervised, in that no-one’s-watching-anyway, one-night-stand kind of way. His hair seemed too neatly combed, I think, his clothes too uniform. Plus, there was this business of his overwhelming sadness.

Even though he smiled a great deal as he told me that he was treating himself to this trip to Paris as a reward for completing his first novel, he did not seem to be a man who was celebrating. Soon I discovered the reason—he was newly divorced, had a young daughter whom he missed terribly, and, to add insult to injury, his newly-divorced wife was a quite famous novelist. I pretended to be impressed when he told me her name, but really it only made me feel more sad for him.

He told me that the next day would be his final day in Paris, and that he had planned to visit the Catacombs buried under the city of Paris, then finish off the day with dinner at The Procope, an upscale restaurant in Paris that bore the distinction—or at least claimed to bear the distinction—of being the oldest eating establishment in all of Europe.

As if on impulse, Scott asked me if I’d like to spend the next day with him, and just as impulsively, I said yes.

_There is no greater bore than a travel bore. We do not in the least want to hear what he has seen in Hong Kong._

—Vita Sackville-West

The next morning after breakfast, Scott and I set out in good walking shoes with our water bottles and backpacks. As we climbed above ground from the Denfert-Rochereau Metro stop, we walked a bit before coming upon the entrance to the Catacombs on the edge of the 14th arrondissement.

I had traveled to Paris to find some traces of my immigrant family’s original culture. Even though my family had emigrated from France to Russia in the early 1800s, and then to America in the early 1900s, I still felt, as I walked the streets of Paris, an affinity—the food, the
smells, a gesture, the curve of a cheekbone, the angle of an eye. I saw my brother, my father, my sisters each day as I walked down the streets. Given that between five to six million people had been buried in the Catacombs over the course of the last two centuries, I thought it would be as close to visiting a family grave as I would get while visiting France.

Scott and I waited in the long queue forming outside the entrance. At eleven AM, the doors flung open and the line began to move. To my right as we filed quickly through the lobby, I noticed a map mounted on the wall showing the cavern we were to enter—1.5 miles of underground walkways full of bones. The Reliquary tunnels, I had read in the guidebooks, were created in the 12th and 13th century out of the giant caverns that resulted from quarrying the limestone that was used for buildings, churches, ramparts and monuments all around the city of Paris.

The first burials in the Catacombs were necessitated by health concerns during massive plague outbreaks in the 1780s. The numerous skeletons were dismantled, reorganized by part, and interred below in neat piles of skulls, femurs, fibulas, and tibias. Death, the great leveler. As one guidebook announced, no distinction for class or political persuasion was made here, “the skull of a revolutionary may be resting on the leg of an aristocrat; noble and corrupt, young and old, wealthy and poor, all are indistinguishable now.”

As we waited in line, I had some horror-movie-imaginings of what we would find below—shelves of laughing jaw bones, long bony-fingered hands, heaping piles of yellow, clacking teeth. The guidebook said the Reliquary was dark and the crypt floor was covered with lime. The book advised to wear good shoes and bring a flashlight. Always the careful traveler, I had packed two flashlights and a compass.

At the Catacomb entrance, Scott and I were pulled by the momentum of the crowd through an area cordoned off with red velvet ropes. We threw our 35 francs each at the woman behind the plate glass window and dashed to the right where a man in a red suit pointed to a slim descending staircase straight ahead.

Down we went, following those ahead of us. The stairs were narrow, just room enough for one person, and they curved downward in tight 360 degree revolutions. I took one complete circle down the staircase, then another. The people in front of me tramped ahead briskly; I matched their pace. The people behind us pushed and moved as we
moved. We were descending deeper, making one revolution down then another when my feet began to go numb.

My lungs grew heavy in my chest. I halted in mid-step and grasped the handrail. The people ahead of me on the staircase rushed headlong, disappearing down and down the spiral into the cavern. An emptiness opened beneath me on the staircase. I could feel Scott’s weight behind me and all the weight of anxious tourists that accumulated up the steps behind him—everyone mad to get underground and see the famous cache of bones.

“There’s no one coming up.” I whispered, as if I’d uncovered a government conspiracy—France’s solution to the problem of too many American tourists?

“Scott,” I said, “this staircase only goes one way.”

“What?” Scott asked. His voice was strained and breathless.

“I can’t go another step.” I sobbed.

“Oh my god,” Scott said with alarm. “Are you claustrophobic?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. Then I realized I, really, sort of, was. I don’t like elevators or crowded rooms or basements without windows. Now I recalled the passing glimpse I’d taken of the Catacomb map on the wall. The red dotted line marking the underground walking path—1.5 miles—that would finally deliver you to the exit. I realized this was all a one-way trip.

“Oh my god,” Scott repeated, realizing the situation. “One time I was in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge, and my feet stopped moving just like this.”

He was saying this to comfort me, but the image of being stranded in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge didn’t help. In fact, it made me begin to hyperventilate, since I’m even more afraid of water and heights than I am of small spaces.

I should have known better than to attempt the Catacombs, but they were a common tourist attraction, all the guidebooks said so. Every year thousands of families—teenagers, infants, toddlers, parents—rolled down this staircase in their khaki shorts and Planet Hollywood t-shirts to take a gander at the acres of dismembered skeletons. This cavern has been in use for over seven hundred years—revolutionaries, bandits, peasants, workers going in and out at all times of the day and night.
It takes supreme arrogance, I realize, to believe that the day you choose to visit the Catacombs, the eight hundred-year-old cavern will decide to give way and bury you and all the unfortunate other people who descended with you on that day. It goes along with being Catholic, I think, the belief that the very particular finger of God is always on just-you.

I'm also certain the centuries-old smoldering volcano will blow the very day I visit; I know the hook-echo of the tornado is heading for my front door. I wouldn't risk the observation decks of either the space needle or the leaning tower of Pisa, nor would I linger around the Acropolis too long, lest the ancient ruins decided to become completely ruined on the day that I visit.

Now that I was frozen on the Catacombs staircase, there was no arguing with my body. I tossed the flashlights and compass in Scott's direction and grabbed the banister. "Go on without me." I threw my shoulder like a wedge into the dozens of tourists pressed behind him, and I began to scale the stairs.

"But where will you be?" Scott asked as I moved past him.

"I'll find you," I shouted back, "wherever you exit." It sounded dramatic, even as I said it, like when Daniel Day Lewis yelled to Madeleine Stowe in The Last of the Mohicans as she was being abducted by unfriendly Apaches, "Stay alive, no matter how long it takes, I will find you."

Scott grew smaller and smaller as I climbed higher. "Tell me everything you see," I yelled, pulling myself up like a salmon swimming against the current. The going was slow.

People muttered in every imaginable language as I squeezed past them. I apologized my way up the curving handrail, ex-cus-e-moi-ing and pardon-me-ing as I climbed. When I reached the ground level opening, the people waiting to descend parted for me to climb out. Without a word, the man in the red suit opened a velvet rope that led to a side exit. He didn't look surprised; I suspected this happened more than a few times a day.

I circled around to the front and swam through the crowd to have one quick look at the map in the lobby which listed a street level exit point several blocks away called the Ossiary Exit. The word, ossiary, with its close association to ossifying and ossification made me shiver. I had a
palpable moment of claustrophobia even then, just imagining myself gasping for breath, trapped in that underground cavern as it collapsed around me. I sprang out of the front door of the Reliquary entrance, driven by the strong impulse to breathe and be supple in my limbs.

Outside, it was a cool, summer morning, not even noon yet. It felt good to breathe in the clear air; the sunlight shining hot on my face. I wandered for blocks in this new light and open space, elated with my good fortune for being this very breathing, above-ground being.

_Travel is glamorous, only in retrospect._
—Paul Theroux

I wound up on a grassy berm somewhere near the boulevard du Montparnasse where so many American writers have sat in smoky cafes and discussed great, developing works of art. The lawn felt so green and open-air against my skin that it was hard to believe that tourists were paying money to walk underground and view the ancient bones of bygone Parisians.

I walked a few more blocks finding only unfamiliar street names. I began to worry. In his backpack, Scott carried the guidebooks and the map back to the hotel. He had navigated us here on the Metro. I had no good idea of where in the city we were.

Ahead of me on the boulevard, I saw three women approaching. I resolved to ask them for help, and I prepared myself for a rebuff. In my experience, men all over Europe will help a single woman. A woman traveling alone seems to be an affront to European men. If you are lost, they will offer to walk you to your destination. If you are eating alone, they will insist you join their group at dinner; they will pour you wine from their carafes, offer cigarettes and matches to light them, then invite you to come along for drinks or a coffee afterwards.

Struggling with my bags in European train stations, I have had men pick up my heaviest suitcase, carry it onto the train for me, and go on their way without a word. The friends to whom I’ve expressed this observation say cynically that the men were simply trying to pick me up. This may be sometimes true, but I don’t believe it is always so.

For the most part, I’ve observed a civility in Europeans that Americans do not possess. Lost in a large American city, I expect and hope to be left alone, to flounder in my lost and aloneness. In Europe, I
know I will be helped. But my observation has also been that European women are less friendly and helpful; just as, in America, I am less likely to help strangers. This is perhaps true all over the world because women must be more mindful of their personal security.

“Pardon me,” I said to the three approaching women. They were French, each one more tall, slim, and angular than the next. “Can you tell me where is the Ossiary Exit?” In my broken English with a fake French accent, it sounded like a bizarre question.

“Ah, an American,” one of the women said with excitement. She fell on me and grabbed my arm as if I were her sister.

“Yes,” I conceded. Usually I tried to conceal my Americanness, even declaring myself a Canadian if times got desperate, and speaking with crisper enunciation and emphasizing my higher, rounder vowels, which I got from growing up in a high, northern state. When I travel, I try to dress well, refusing to wear the typical American tourist costume—tennis shoes, khaki shorts and an untucked t-shirt with a logo from some garish American franchise like the Hard Rock Café. I find the better dressed I am when I travel, the better I am treated by everyone I encounter.

Now I spoke in English to the three French women, who listened attentively. I spilled it all out—about the Catacombs, my panic, my surprise at my claustrophobia. The most friendly woman seemed to have the best English. She held my forearm as I talked. All three “No’d” and “Yes’d” through my story, then they had a short interchange in French. They talked quickly, nodded, and clicked their tongues; they didn’t need to translate. The Catacombs, yes, a ghastly place.

They were beautiful women, long-limbed and elegant. They walked six blocks out of their way to show me to the Ossiary Exit, then the friendliest one kissed both my cheeks and deposited me on the dusty stoop overlooking the opening.

I sat on the curb after they left, drinking a bottle of mineral water, and watching as countless tourists ascended the steps from the Catacombs. Many of them came through the Ossiary Exit, short of breath and perspiring. They emptied out onto the sidewalk, many of them ashen-faced, bending over, taking deep gulps of air as they stepped into the light.

You could see that the journey through the cavern had been an ordeal for them, as I suspected it would be. But when, I wondered, had it
occurred to them that danger was possible or imminent—somewhere deep underground, when it was too late? Either I was too phobia-laden and full of trepidation to be a truly intrepid traveler, or I had an early-warning system programmed into my DNA, the same thing that impelled my ancestors to flee revolutions in France then Russia.

My family line had survived, after all, because my ancestors had known to read the early warning signs and flee the instability of Alsace in 1803. Their descendants had known to pick up stakes and flee the growing instability of Russia one hundred years later. Even as a wild young woman in 1960s America, seemingly racing toward the brink of destruction, I always knew before my friends when to put on the brakes.

Far Travel, very far travel, or travail, comes near to the worth of staying at home.
—Henry David Thoreau

Scott appeared eventually up the Catacomb steps. He was happy and perspiring, but not traumatized in any way from his journey through the Underworld.

True to his word, he told me everything he had seen as we walked back to the Metro stop—the long, dark tunnels, the dripping water, the bone heaps, piles of craniums, the walls of bones quilted with patterns of femurs, and, near the end of the trek, the clear water drinking fountain of Lethe, or de l’oublié which invites you to drink and forget all that you have seen on your passage. Showing the greatest restraint and good taste, Scott did not ask me about my panic on the stairs or question me about my claustrophobia.

Later that night, after I bathed and put on a fresh, black dress and sandals, I met him in the hotel lobby and we walked the few blocks in the Latin Quarter to the Procope. The food was good as I recall—oysters on the half shell with mignonette sauce, brazed duck with glazed shallots, chocolate soufflé for dessert—but the waiters glared at us with the delivery of each platter.

In between courses, we licked our wounds by making fun of the scowling waiter, deciding that even though The Procope boasted the longest run as any eating establishment in Europe, they still had not perfected their style. In all the meals I had in Paris, before or since, it was the only one in which I was treated badly.
Scott insisted on paying for the meal, the price of which I knew was exorbitant. We walked back to the hotel in silence. It was his last night in Paris. We collected our keys at the hotel desk under the suspicious eye of the clerk, and walked together up the spiral staircase of the Hotel des Balcons.

I recall inviting him in my room, because it seemed rude not to do so, even though I didn't have any wine or coffee or cognac and chocolates to offer him. He sat on the edge of my bed for a time and we talked about writing. He talked about his early flight, calculating how much time he should allow for getting to the airport in the morning. And then he left, perhaps seeing that I was not interested in anything more than talk.

At the doorway, we double-kissed each others’ checks and exchanged business cards. We promised to e-mail, but we never did. In the years since, I've looked for his published novel, putting his name into the search engine of Amazon from time to time. As far as I can tell, his novel has never appeared, although his ex-wife, I have observed, continues to get more and more famous with each passing year.