

Elephants in Paris is Scott Corey's entertaining account of his life in Paris, France. It begins with a French boy in a fringed jacket, and continues with anecdotes about the eccentric expats, Parisians, and refugees he meets.

ELEPHANTS IN PARIS

By Scott Corey

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Elephants
in Paris

A Memoir

Scott Corey

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Chapter 1

Boy in the Fringed Cowboy Jacket

O'Hare International Airport
September, 1981

Our journey to Paris started with a French boy in a fringed cowboy jacket. He was slowly making his way down the aisle of the Icelandic Airlines flight to Luxembourg City. I knew he would sit in our row. I knew this because I had noticed him in the boarding area and Murphy's Law Number One of Air Travel states that if you notice someone in the gate area, they will inevitably sit near you. At least, it had always proven true for me.

Murphy's Law Number Two states that if there is a young mother with a crying child at the gate, they will *not* be in your row—they will sit directly behind you. The child will scream bloody murder the entire flight, and if they are old enough, they will also systematically kick your seat like a conga drum. I hadn't noticed any mothers with babies at the gate, so I relaxed into my seat and prayed for a tranquil flight. I had, however, seen the boy in the fringed jacket and watched with a mixture of curiosity and fatigue as he edged down the aisle.

When he reached our row, he glanced at his boarding pass, up at the row number, and then at me. He had dark curly hair and an eager, engaging grin. I glanced down at his feet to see if he was wearing cowboy boots. He wasn't. Below the edge of his faded jeans was a pair of high-top black Converse tennis shoes.

"*C'est moi,*" he said, pointing to the open seat beside my wife.

I began to stand up and let him through when he held up his right index finger and grinned again.

"Ah, hah," he said and scooted through the empty row in front of us and around to the other side. A red, white, and blue Air France bag

hung from his shoulder. He put this in an overhead compartment and settled into the seat beside us.

My wife smiled at him. She had the genetic gift of liking everyone. I was more withdrawn socially and—especially on airplanes—preferred to sit quietly and read, listen to an audio book, or sleep.

Within a few moments, they were chatting amiably and after a few more minutes, Claudia leaned over to me and whispered, “His name is Lucien. He’s fifteen and has been visiting friends in Colorado. This was his first trip to the states. His family lives in Paris.”

“Wow,” I said and closed my eyes.

We were also on our way to Paris. For the past two years, Claudia and I had lived in West Africa. As we were preparing to leave the bush lands, an acquaintance had taken a letter from his pocket and waved it under my nose.

“From a school in Paris,” he said. “They’re looking for teachers who can speak French and have overseas experience. You should apply. You’d be perfect.”

I wrote to the school and requested a job interview. A month later we stood shivering on the Place l’Odeon. It was July and sunny in Paris, but during the dry season in the bushland, the temperature often rose to 120 degrees. This made the French weather feel chilly. I did not expect this and hadn’t brought a jacket. So, to keep warm, I wore two shirts and a sweater.

The English Language School had offered me the job and now, in September, we were returning to Paris to live.

Our flight from O’Hare was about to take off. I can’t count the amount of times I’ve fallen asleep before take-off and awakened later at thirty thousand feet. There is something lulling about the steady hum of the engines, combined with the cramped boredom of the narrow seats, that knocks me out. Ironically, once the airplane is in the air, I can’t go back to sleep no matter how hard I try.

Eventually, we touched down in Luxembourg and made our way through the beautiful city to the train station. The final leg of our trip to Paris was made in an *entraîneur de deuxième classe*—or Second-Class coach. Lucien accompanied us. By now Claudia had essentially adopted him and I was computing how much it would cost us to put him through college. Of course, only the best university would do for a boy of his character and intelligence.

As Claudia taught Lucien to play gin rummy on the train, I unfolded a map of Paris. Our train was scheduled to arrive in the Gare du Nord at 9pm. In the haste to catch our flight—which included a frantic return to my in-laws’ house to retrieve passports left on a bedroom dresser—I hadn’t made any hotel reservations.

This is where serendipity entered our lives—if you don’t count Lucien being seated beside us, which was undoubtedly the first step in this bit of good fortune.

“Lucien’s parents are going to meet him at the station,” Claudia informed me. “He says they can find us a hotel.”

“Wow,” I said. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“Maybe if you’d played a few games of cards with him,” she said.

Nicolas and Lena Allard greeted us on the platform as we stepped off the train. He was tall with long gray hair combed back over his collar and she was small and lean with blonde hair and sharp features. We waited self-consciously as Lucien explained our situation. His parents nodded as he talked and then gazed at us.

“Thank you for keeping an eye on him,” his mother said. “You know how it is when teenagers travel alone. We are always a bit worried.”

“Of course,” we both agreed.

“You are looking for a hotel?” Nicolas asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “We didn’t have time to make a reservation.”

He nodded. "I know one on the rue de Sampaix. Not far. We will take you."

Grabbing our bags, we followed the Allards through the scuffed lobby of the Gare du Nord and out to the rue de Dunkerque with its traffic and yellow arc lights.

As we strolled, I breathed in the night air and the scent of Paris. I loved the city with its tall apartment buildings, streets designed by George-Eugène Haussmann, sidewalk cafes, the Seine twinkling in the lights of passing boats, the bridges—especially the Pont Neuf and the Pont Alexandre III—and of course, the Latin Quarter. Every time I arrived in Paris, a surge of excitement ran through me.

"What is your occupation?" Nicolas asked as we turned onto the rue du Faubourg Saint Denis.

"I'm a teacher," I replied.

"*Ah bon,*" he said. "*Mathématiques?*"

"English."

"Of course."

"And you?" I asked.

"*Journaliste,*" he replied.

The hotel was a narrow, four-story building painted gray with a large glass window and a door leading into the lobby. A blue neon sign blinked the simple announcement of HOTEL above our heads.

"*Ça va?*" Nicolas asked.

"Perfect," I said.

Lena spoke up. "Are you free for dinner on Wednesday?"

I turned to Claudia.

"Do we have plans?" I asked.

"Let me think," she said with a smirk.

We had no plans for Wednesday evening or any other evening.

"I guess not," she replied.

"*Bon,*" Lena said.

She jotted their address on a scrap of paper and handed it to Claudia. A bond had already developed between them and it was obvious that from now on, the women would organize all social interactions. Nicolas and I were simply along for the ride. We shook hands, kissed cheeks, and waved as the Allards headed toward the Métro. Then we opened the glass door and stepped into the hotel lobby.

A woman behind the counter gazed at us with total indifference. She wore a dirty smock pulled over a tattered sweater. Her fingernails were stained brown from cigarettes. The burning tip of one jutted from between her fingers. I immediately had misgivings. I got the feeling that if I dropped dead in the lobby, she would only lean over the counter, gaze at me, and mutter, “*Ah boff.*”

Nicolas Allard had suggested this place, so it must be okay. Madame Apathy—as I now thought of her—asked for our passports, jotted down our information, and gave us a room key. I had been prepared to spend the evening in an exhausting search to find a hotel room and now *voilà*—thanks to the Allards, we had one within a few minutes.

The third-floor room was tiny, with a sagging double bed and red wallpaper. I imagined it was rented by the hour in the daytime. But we were weary after our transatlantic flight and only wanted to sleep. I changed my mind, however, when I tossed my bag onto the bed and it moved; not the bed itself, but something on the bed. The room was crawling with cockroaches.

“Oh my God!” Claudia exclaimed.

“Don’t set anything down,” I warned, grabbing my bag.

We leaped out of the room and slammed the door.

Claudia gave a shudder. “I haven’t seen anything like that since Ouagadougou,” she cried, referring to a town we had visited in the sub-Saharan.

I gazed at the door and thought I saw a slight rumbling movement, as if thousands of roaches were on the other side pressing against the wood. It was probably my imagination, but still ...

“We can’t stay here,” Claudia said.

“No shit,” I replied.

We hurried down the stairs and back to the counter. Madame Apathy looked even more detached when we told her about the insects.

“If you wish to wait,” she offered, “I will have the room fumigated.”

We had been through this before at a hotel in Abidjan and the insecticide fumes emanating from the mattress during the night had nearly killed us. We awakened the next morning looking pale, shaking, and with severe headaches. Not again. There was no way this was going to end well when it was nearly ten o’clock at night.

“We’re leaving,” I said and tossed the room key onto the counter.

Madame Apathy shrugged and tore up our passport information.

“Gees,” I gasped as we slammed through the entrance and out to the street.

Claudia’s body gave a final spasm of revulsion.

“Can you imagine trying to sleep in there?” she asked.

I laughed. The room was so gross it was amusing. “No way.”

She laughed too. “Where to now?”

I glanced up the street and saw two other hotel signs. “Let’s try those.”

Picking up our bags and giving them a violent shake to see if any cockroaches dropped off, we headed up the street. Unfortunately, both hotels had signs blinking in their windows that said *Complet* – which meant no vacancy.

“Feel like a stroll?” I asked.

“You’re joking, right?” Claudia responded.

A corner café had outside tables and since this was early September, the evening weather was pleasant.

“I could use a beer,” I said.

Claudia gave a sigh. “Okay.”

She ordered a Kier and I ordered a Pelforth Brune—a full-bodied dark beer. It felt good to relax for a few minutes and to appreciate being in Paris once again, even though we had no place to sleep.

I was just finishing my beer and thinking about ordering another when I spied the glow of a brightly lit sign around the corner. Could it possibly be another hotel?

“Look,” I said, pointing.

We paid our check and left the cafe.

As we rounded the corner, a neon sign announced the *Deux Hemispheres Hotel*.

The front of the hotel was painted white, with large wood-framed windows and a cheerful front entrance. Black wrought-iron gratings decorated the second-floor windows. The hotel seemed pleasant and I was optimistic.

A slender man with dark hair and a thick moustache greeted us as we entered. A tag on his maroon vest informed us this was Salim.

“We would like a room for the night,” I said.

Salim clapped his hands together cheerfully. “Yes, yes,” he said. “No Problem.”

We went through the check-in procedure again and received another room key.

“We are all Algerians here,” Salim announced with a broad smile. “The counter staff, the femme de ménage ... everyone.”

“That’s nice,” Claudia said.

Our room was on the second floor. We entered with some trepidation, expecting at any moment to see a tide of cockroaches advancing on us from the darkened corners. But the room was clean and well-maintained. This time I didn’t mind tossing my bag onto the bedspread.

Claudia hesitated in the doorway, her eyes scanning every surface and wall.

“I guess it’s okay,” she said at last.

Just to make sure, I pulled back the bedcovers to reveal a starched white sheet.

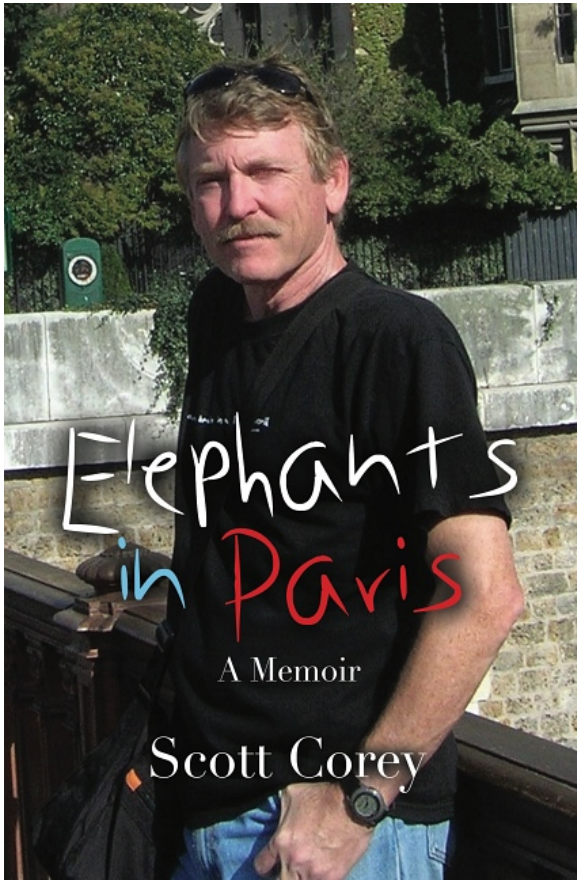
“Clear here,” I said.

“Thank God,” she murmured. “I can’t keep my eyes open any longer.”

“It was the Kier,” I said.

“Maybe,” she said and stepped into the bathroom.

That night I lay with my arms behind my head and listened to traffic passing on the Boulevard de Magenta. Hotels and apartment buildings in Paris had a particular scent. I imagined it came from the type of cleaning products used. Every time I breathed in that scent, it reminded me of the famous artists and writers who had lived here, of the books about Paris I’d read, the museums I’d visited, the paintings I’d seen, and my heart beat a little faster. Finally, after so many years of dreaming about it, I was going to live in Paris. I was going to get up every morning, open the shutters, breathe in Paris, and feel the hum of the city around me.



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