

LOST ON A TRAIN IN FRANCE

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English is pretty much a universal language in the world today, and in many places you travel to, you can find someone who speaks a little English and get along fine. But one dark night, lost somewhere in the suburbs of Paris, when I really needed somebody's help, nobody spoke English and everybody, it seemed, was antagonistic to stupid Americans, particularly if they were stupid enough to be lost.

I had been in France for a few months to help install a food processing machine in a local plant—that being a long, uninteresting story, but suffice it to say, I had a whole lot of free time.

Out in the country, the French are very warm people, eager to invite you to their homes for some excellent wine and a typical five-course meal. They are also more than happy to attend any “swaree” you throw as a return favor. The French, I discovered, have placed “work” fairly low on their list of priorities. After a while, I found myself; a “gotta-work-hard-and-compete-so-keep-on-pushing” American doing the same. It was pleasant and much less stressful, but in the long run—not being supported by a socialist system—our company suffered, as evidenced by the fact that today they are no longer in existence. But that's a long, sad tale and I don't want to relive it. And I don't blame the French either.

So, back to the story.

After a month and a half, I learned a few French words. I figured out what *peche* meant. It meant Phillippe—a local maintenance worker whom I had befriended—was taking me fishing. To my relief I discovered that *Poisson* did not mean poison on the menu, it meant fish. Beef is *boeuf* (sounds like “buff”) and chicken is *poulet* and don't you be pronouncing that last consonant.

Along with the standard *bon jour* and *mer ci*, I got along fine.

I even walked into a bank in the small country town of St. Jean de Angely and communicated well enough with the bankers there to withdraw some needed funds from my bank account in the US to sustain me a little longer on my trip. It seemed everyone spoke at least a little English, except Phillippe—my fishing friend—and we still managed just fine.

Much of my time in France was spent aided by an interpreter, Ingrid Powells, who could shift from English to French to German to Spanish in a split second—a skill I admire greatly because I certainly don't possess it. In fact, the pinnacle of my French speaking was *Oh la Vash* (Holy Cow) which always seemed to make French people laugh and nod when you used it as an acknowledgement.

But it was time to go home now. Most of our group had already left and only two of us remained.

I would be taking the TGV (bullet train) from the nearby coastal city of La Rochelle to Paris. From there I would change trains at the Montparnasse Train Station and catch another train to Charles De Gaulle airport. From the airport hotel, I would board my flight home in the morning.

I just needed directions from Ingrid.

Knowing my penchant for ignoring the details of my surroundings, Ingrid wrote out instructions for purchasing my ticket in French. I was to give this note to the person at the ticket window at the train station in La Rochelle. This, to save me the embarrassment of fumbling about (“uh, train, uh Charles de Gaulle, ticket, uh me to go to”), but not the embarrassment of looking like a little schoolboy with a note from Mommy.

Apparently, the note gave explicit instructions to the ticket person for the ticket and hopefully did not contain a disparaging remark about me such as, “Hi, I’m a silly bumpkin from America, please give me a ticket to....”

I arrive at the train station (or *Gare* as they call it) in the late afternoon burdened with a very large suitcase and a smaller, but heavier backpack containing my computer and other electronic equipment. I presented my note to the man at the ticket window.

The ticket person looks at me rather annoyed (which is why I suspect Ingrid put some kind of disparagement in the note), accepts my money and shoves me a ticket.

Feeling somewhat disconcerted, and looking curiously back a few times, I walk off to catch my train.

Okay, first obstacle overcome. I’m on my way to Paris. No worries, just a slight feeling of stupidity from the look on that ticket person’s face.

The ride to Paris was uneventful. I read over the instructions Ingrid wrote for me to follow when I arrive in Paris and transfer from the TGV to the standard commuter-type train that will take me to Charles de Gaulle airport:

“Get off the train, take the escalators down two levels. Purchase a ticket to the airport. Get on the train. Simple.”

Unfortunately, the instructions were more implicit than explicit. “Purchase the ticket” did not include which train, what concourse, what route number, etc. I had purposely not clarified this with Ingrid because she was acting like a mother at the time (writing me notes and all) and thought I would rather just figure it out than take one more minute of her patronizing explanations. Turns out that was a bad decision.

I arrive at the ticket window area and stare at the big map on the wall to determine my route to the airport. If you've ever seen a map of Paris, you understand it looks like a spider's web rather than an orderly grid of parallel streets. They all just "converge" at the Eiffel Tower or the Cathedral de Notre Dame or somewhere around there. There's no rhyme or reason to the grid. And me—being an engineer—simply can't comprehend this.

I look over the map hopelessly, unable to locate my present position—let alone my destination. (The friendly red "You are here" arrow is absent). It's 10:30 at night and I just want to get to the hotel.

Oh la vash! is my response. But nobody laughed this time.

Well, when maps don't make sense, you ask someone—even if you're a guy—particularly when you're lost in a foreign country. But that gets complicated when you don't speak the language.

I get in line at the ticket window and when my turn comes up I hopefully say, "Charles de Gaulle" to the girl at the window. Unfortunately, I receive the same hostile glare I'd gotten from the other ticket attendant in La Rochelle. (Was it me? Was this just a bad day for ticket people? Had the Americans recently done something to offend the French?)

She continues to glare at me as if to say "and...?" Obviously she needs more information.

Well, I don't have any more!

She asks me a question in French. I bumble an "English, no French" response and she simply asks me again.

After a brief standoff, and a few more “Charles de Gaulle, uh airport, ticket, me” she shakes her head, rolls her eyes, takes my money and gives me a ticket, leaving me again with a very disconcerted feeling about the whole exchange.

And worse, I now have to ask her where I go from here (that is, which of those gates do I go through to get to the correct terminal). Meanwhile, I feel the glare in my back from the line of people behind me—all French people who know where they’re going and just want this bumbling American to move on.

After an awkward exchange—which only further irritates the ticket girl and introverts me—she points to a gate to the right.

I scan my ticket and fumble to get my bulky suitcase through the gate doors before they automatically close.

Slam! I barely make it through the doors, but my backpack does not.

The doors slam shut just as my shoulders pass through. The gate closes between me and my backpack, compressing my shoulder straps, wedging me in. There I stand unable to move, unable to get out of my wedged pack, stuck, stuck on stupid.

Finally, a few people nearby grudgingly pry the door open—but only because they need to get through the gate too— and I’m free.

Ever feel like you’re the stupidest person in the room and everyone knows it? How about in the country?

I really hate that.

I somehow manage to find the railway platform despite all, and with no confidence whatsoever, board the next train and take a seat.

I don't know if I'm on the right train. In fact, I don't know who I am at this point—only that I'm not French.

I look around and there, on the back wall of the cabin, I see a route sign and along the route sign are indicator lights with names of the stops beside them and at the end of the route is (thank God) a light that has the name "Charles de Gaulle" beside it.

Praise the Lord, I'm almost there!

I relax into my seat. I briefly un-relax when I notice there is actually a fork in that map. I remain fairly confident that this must be the right train. I look around at the people on the train. There are not very many people on this train, and nobody has a suitcase. This does nothing for my waning sense of security.

Somewhere behind a speaker the conductor calmly calls out each stop as the lights on the map move progressively up the route toward the only place I want to be tonight.

Eventually, the light at the fork comes on and the train stops to let off passengers. The conductor calls out the name. The train moves on. I feel a slight twinge of nerves as I watch for the next light to come on.

You guessed it. The light that comes on for the next stop is not along the route to the airport. It follows the fork to the right.

"No, no, it can't be."

The conductor voice calmly calls the name of the next on the map as if this is Okay. It isn't!

The train continues. All I know is that I'm going away from where I'm supposed to go. It's late at night and I have to at least get off this train.

I suddenly get a picture in my mind of the ticket girl snickering—snickering at me. I think she knew this would happen. I hate her. I hate the French and they hate me. It's not

good to hate the French when you're on their turf—particularly when you're alone. But the only two emotions I seem to be capable of right now are fear and blame.

I get off at the next stop. It's just a big cement slab in the middle of some semi-residential area of Paris. It looks like a bus stop only there's nothing around here, no friendly lighted public areas, no stores, no lighted streets, nothing! It is now 11:30 at night and dark and there's not a soul here. Not a soul! You'd think someone would be here. What is this place?

I spot two police walking by with German Shepherds on a leash. I haven't seen any police with German Shepherds at any other stop! This says to me, "This is a dangerous place. You shouldn't be here. Nobody else is." They look curiously at me standing here on a deserted train platform with luggage, but they move on. I don't stop them. I don't want to ask for directions anymore. I'm sure they don't speak English. At this point I'd rather be lost and hopeless—I'm getting my wish.

I look up at the train schedule board. It is 11:35 p.m. and it indicates that there is one more train passing through this station tonight— that's it. After that, it's just me, the police, the German Shepherds and whatever hidden sinister element has caused them to be here tonight.

For some reason I feel calm now and I know what to do. It's strange, but when you finally reach a state of complete failure, you either start crying and collapse or get calm and aware. I always get calm. I wish I'd just stay that way all the time, but I suppose I have to make life interesting.

I catch the last train going back in the direction I came. I get off at the fork and jump on the next train heading for Charles de Gaulle airport.

This is not that hard! Why was it so difficult? I even feel part of the crowd of commuters now. And nobody is hostile anymore. I could even get along with that ticket girl if I were to start again.

I arrive at the hotel. The rest is routine.

I think it began with that look on the ticket person's face in La Rochelle. He made me feel stupid. Or, more accurately, I let him make me feel stupid; therefore, I was.

And to amend a Forest Gump maxim, "Stupid is as one decides he is stupid."

I decided I was stupid and elected the French as my opponents.

It made a good game, but next time I think I'll make the game "have a good time."

Sounds like a better game to me.

J.W. Northrup

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o THE GOLD SLAVES SYNOPSIS:

Remember the Heaven's Gate Cult? What if they had told the truth? What if they in fact had rendezvoused with the ship behind the Hale-Bopp comet after their mass suicide and were now thriving on a new higher plane of existence. And what if the member who stayed behind were to stand out on the street corner with a megaphone and give us this "truth". What would we have done with it?

We would have declared him crazy of course – possibly a murderer. Maybe we would put him in a state hospital and load him up with enough Thorazine to make him "sane" again.

But what if WE are wrong?

Well from where we are sitting, we just can't tell. You can roll your eyes and say, "everybody knows they were some crazy cult", but you don't know that, you can't know that. You can't

jump in a spaceship and fly behind that Hale-Bopp comet and take a look for yourself, so frankly you just don't know. You can claim you do all you want; you can declare yourself an *Anti-Heavensgapist* and preach how they were misguided beings lead by an evil man and you'd probably get a whole lot of agreement, but so what? You still don't know. You would be "right" according our society, but you could not know.

So what if we ARE wrong and they were right? Would we be able to "see" their truth? No way. Our vision would never penetrate the boundaries of our own dearly beloved principles and philosophies; confined as we are by our scientific laws, religious doctrines, economic principles and pet philosophies. We can't see through them any more than we could see the sky from inside a mine two thousand feet below the surface.

And that is what my story is about; a group of gold miners that live two thousand feet below the surface of the earth.

For over a hundred years the Gold Slaves have been trapped within the earth, completely unaware of the surface. They have no idea they are "in" anything. They call their world *Space* just as we call ours Earth and their barrier is obvious—solid rock.

The Gold Slaves offer gold to the Gods above through two mine shafts (they believe they are divine connections to their gods) and in return, they are granted food. That is the basis of their existence. From the surface we can *easily* see that they are slaves to a mining company. We laugh critically and think what a silly fairy tale these people have fallen for! Gold is offered to Gods? Food only comes from gods? The universe is solid? Mankind's purpose is to follow the golden paths to Heaven? How silly and ignorant can these people be!

Here's the irony; during the one hundred years the slave miners have been confined in their stark, inhospitable environment, they have developed technologies that would baffle a Harvard Professor. For instance, they discovered electricity, which they utilize to illuminate their underground world and run their machinery; and it is completely wireless! (Don't ask me how it works, I don't know). And don't try to tell me it's impossible, all you MIT know-it-all's. If you knew everything you would have a formula that would reduce war to zero or an equation that solved arguments, or a potion that dissolved hate—all of which, incidentally, have been solved below by the Gold Slaves.

The mental and spiritual technology of *Space* is far superior to ours. In their world there is no neurosis, psychosis or any of the hundreds of other “mental disorders” listed in the ridiculous Diagnostics Manual that our supposed mental health professionals use to justify our conditions.

They may have to execute some wild twists with logic to explain the world from their viewpoint but as far as sanity and happiness is concerned, they are far better off than the people on the surface.

In the story, two of the Gold Slaves—“Columbus's” of their world—accidentally escape through an adjoining cave network and step out of the earth into the sun. Now the “truth” of their situation becomes obvious. From outside the cave, they can clearly see that they have been trapped inside the Earth. They also realize that they were trapped by a philosophy that inhibited them from looking.

Once they stepped out of the Earth, their religion falls apart; not by conflict or persuasion, or terrorism or war, but simply because they suddenly found themselves in a position from which

they could actually see! Could our religions and schools of thought fall apart were we to step out of whatever fixes us into our “tunnel vision” on Earth?

I’m suggesting this because I think we can all agree mankind hasn’t exactly come up with workable solutions to happiness and well being. Now far be it for me to add my solutions to the overflowing mishmash of dearly held and ferociously defended opinions, pseudo-facts and philosophies, but allow me to suggest the possibility that from the position we are in, we just can’t see it. BUT were we to “step out” and view things from another, as yet unforeseen viewpoint, it would become as obvious as the two Gold Slaves stepping out of the mine.

So what is this thing we are “in” that has makes it impossible for us to see? What is our two thousand foot solid rock barrier?

Are you ready?

Amnesia!

That is the “out” we the surface people have never been freed of. First because you don’t even know you have it. Second because you don’t know how to removed the veil of unknowing that has been placed upon you by a mechanical mind—a mind programmed to make you aware of what you need to be aware of and keep you oblivious to your past—and I’m not talking past *life*, I’m talking past LIVES. Don’t believe it? Of course not, you mustn’t believe it. It would ruin everything – it would render war useless, introduce incredibly advanced technologies, invalidate Charles Darwin, cause the pharmacology industry to collapse, blow up the insurance industry, completely nullify control of the people by force and thus put the police and the military out of work, even step on the toes of a few religions. No,

you don't want to know this. It would ruin the game. It would be as earth shattering as two Gold Slaves walking out of the mine. Don't walk out of that cave, go back inside.

But if you care to investigate this a bit further, read the next Science Fiction novel by J.W. Northrup; "Total Amnesia" and find out how you—like the two Gold Slaves—can step out of the mine.

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