

“Day One” excerpt from *Algren in Wonderland*

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day ONE

The decision to visit Paris was based on the advice of my psychiatrist, who concluded that a change of scenery would do well to improve my health. It became obvious through our sessions that my decline could be attributed to both a horrendous diet and slavish work schedule, which typically found me hunched over a desk for the better part of each day. Years of unnatural living and solitude had finally caught up with me. And so, with the hope of reinvigorating my dulled anima, I wasted no time booking a flight to that famed city on the Seine.

During the month-long preparation for my journey, I made immense improvements to my health, developing a low-impact exercise routine, mastering the art of

juicing, and negating red meat save the occasional White Castle. All the while I also took a brief hiatus from my writing, as was also suggested by my psychiatrist. The month quickly came to an end, and by the time the Yellow Cab dropped me off at the airport, I felt like a man well on his way to recovery.

I was thrilled by the prospects ahead, which just went to remind me how static and uninspired my writing had become of late: one formulaic book after another, replicas really, with only minor variance in plot. It was high time that I move in a new direction, sever the umbilical to my contract-dependent career, and perhaps construct a work so outlandish that it might never again be optioned for some two-bit mini-series on ABC.

I spent a good deal of time imagining myself in this and similar scenarios, which did well to preoccupy my mind during the choppy connecting flight. I attributed the state of things not to pilot error but to the fact that the ancient 737 should have been mothballed years ago.

During a two-hour layover in Detroit, I felt as though I had disembarked into some futuristic port-of-call. Sleek red trams floated quietly along overhead rails,

stainless-steel slidewalks ushered travelers to and fro, and billboard televisions eclipsed the wall of each gate.

It was beneath one such monstrosity that I found myself jotting first impressions into a cheap notebook which I had purchased, with other essentials, at my local Wal-Mart. I was surprised that the shifting patterns of light emanating from the big screen did not incite an epileptic fit, to which, on occasion, I was prone.

After nearly an hour of sitting with my head at an awkward angle, squinting and trying to make out what I had written, I felt a sharp crick in my neck. I glanced up, trying to relieve a bit of the tension. A father and daughter sat opposite me in stylish barcelona chairs. The father must have just related a humorous anecdote, for his daughter's cheeks lit up in an affectionate smile. It was a rather quaint scene, which warmed my heart and encouraged a modicum of tears.

After my divorce, I had spent the better part of a year fighting for custody of my own daughter, whom I now saw, at best, twice a year. That had been a difficult period of my life, but I had come out of it, dealing with the loss in my own way, applying myself to a writing schedule

which, ironically, had nearly been the death of me.

The majority of my royalty checks went to a 529 college savings plan set aside to fund my daughter's education at Harvard, or so I fantasized. If the direction her mother was leading her were any indication, she would more likely find herself a contestant on some future incarnation of *American Idol*.

An announcement came over the sophisticated PA system, proclaiming that my flight to Europe would now commence boarding. I glanced at the young girl across the way, taken, strangely enough, by her homemade socks. They were a luminous green with white filigree, and had the name "Alice" stitched into the fabric.

The altogether charming detail stood in stark contrast to the cryptic words I had encountered in the restroom over an hour ago. Some depressed youth had written, just above the paper dispenser: *Everything Is Dead, Everyday Is Dark*.

The message effectively resurfaced memories of my own desperate teenage years, which had bound me to bullied subservience until graduation. Indeed, I had been a shy and introverted youth, prone to ribbing by my

fellow classmates. How I had managed to survive those hellish years and turn myself into a somewhat successful novelist was not so hard to imagine. Early on I had existed almost exclusively in settings other than my own. Fiction sustained me and provided the impetus to create my own future tales of nonexistence.

Both of my parents had died when I was seven years old, the result of an auto accident. I had subsequently been reared by my godmother aunt, who cultivated in me a respect for art and literature, encouraging and developing my skills until I was eighteen, at which point she signed herself into an asylum, where she remains to this day.

Weekly visits provided the raw material for my most popular work. Indeed, it was this very book which brought my name, via *Oprah*, to nearly every household in America, and which had resided on the New York *Times* bestseller list for just over two years. The memoir (“Algren’s undoubted swan song,” ventured one critic) was entitled *Aunt Cuckoo*, and had resulted in royalty checks the likes of which I have never again encountered.

These had, of course, been deposited almost exclu-

sively into the 529, with enough left over to cover the expense of an antique typewriter collection (seven of them, all told), the most obscure model setting me back nearly three grand. I would be the first to admit the inanity of such an obsession, but, truth be told, I've always found comfort in the sturdy technology of the past.

All of these impeccable machines were destroyed by a burglar who broke into my apartment while I was visiting my agent in New York. The vandal had uncovered no money, and so instead took his rage out on this collection, including my precious Olivetti 33, which I had composed on for over ten years.

In the end I refused to bow to the vandal's implicit suggestion that I once and for all embrace current trends: i.e., a fashionable PC. I had always imagined myself a man of the past, resurrected somehow into the high tech distraction of our present.

And so, on my thirty-third birthday, I visited an antique store in Minneapolis called The Atelier and purchased a pristine Hermes, which had been all the rage in the 1950s. The vibrant machine was the color of a pistachio, and precise and durable as a Swiss clock. It

would never replace my favorite Olivetti, but I felt an almost immediate kinship with the impeccable writer.

It comes as no surprise, then, that I carefully packed this machine, in preparation for its long oversea journey, in what to my mind was an indestructible cocoon of cardboard and duct tape. For a moment, the thought of reopening the package on European soil teased me with an uncharacteristic giddiness.

But now, as I gazed out the porthole at the dark January sky, I found myself reconsidering those dire words scratched upon the urinal wall, for the ascent over Detroit was extraordinarily bleak. Indeed, the over-lit cityscape below resembled an apocalypse rendered by Hieronymus Bosch.

Feeling darkly inspired, I retrieved my notebook and attempted to capture the scene. I was astonished by the vividness of my prose, which I attributed to the fact that I would normally be asleep at this hour, dreaming. It had been suggested by my agent that I attempt to sleep for much of the journey, so as to temper an inevitable bout of jet lag. Truth be told, I was thoroughly enjoying the delectable dreamscape I had achieved. I found myself

revisiting the automatic writing I had practiced as a teen under the tutelage of my aunt.

Nearly an hour passed in this manner, but eventually I made the acquaintance of a stewardess whose name-tag read: Marianne. She smiled sweetly, offering me a bag of Spinzels and my choice of soda or wine. Without giving it too much consideration, I chose the latter. I glanced through the porthole, noticing that it had become much brighter outside.

Pleased with my productivity, I reached into my carry-on and retrieved a book by Simenon (*Monsieur Monde Vanishes*) that my agent had encouraged me to read. I finished the intriguing but brief tale in under an hour. Consulting my Skagen, I was startled to learn that it was nearly nine in the morning. The sun rose into view, revealing a vast expanse of cumulus clouds. To a young girl two rows up, the stunning vista resembled “some big old brain.”

My attention wandered from the cottony terrain to a small video monitor embedded in the seat in front of me. The screen showed the progress of our flight from America to Europe, all of which was denoted by a

digitized arc cast over a two-dimensional globe. The simplistic depiction encouraged both comfort and concern. I began to imagine that the entire flight had been an elaborate technical hoax, that in actuality the 747 had never left Detroit. I leaned against the porthole as the plane slipped momentarily into white limbo.

A vast countryside suddenly came into view, agrarian fields stretching into the far distance. At one point I was astonished to glimpse a group of white hares, seemingly as large as cows, grazing in an open field. This strange illusion eventually righted itself, leaving me to wonder if my sleepless night was to blame (for the hares were indeed cows). This rural wonderland was soon replaced by an urban labyrinth filled with tiny autos streaming along grayish pathways.

The 747 jolted without warning, and I returned my attention to the flight screen. I closed my eyes, suddenly feeling sick to my stomach. The landing, when it came, was far from perfect. After briefly touching the runway, the plane leaped back into the air, sending many passengers into hysterics. Eventually, though, the 747 made contact with the earth and began taxiing leisurely toward

the gate.

From a distance the Charles de Gaulle terminal might easily have been mistaken for one of the UFOs featured in many of the outrageous sci-fi extravaganzas of the 1950s, complete with landing gear and ovoid shell.

I was startled by how decrepit the airport was, compared to Detroit's. It almost felt as though the 747, in the role of time machine, had actually taken me back half a century. The De Gaulle terminal had undoubtedly been considered as high-tech in the 1960s as Detroit Metro was in the present day, but forty years hence it was nothing more than the set-piece for some as yet unfilmed space-opera.

I stepped cautiously onto a teetering slidewalk, which slowly escorted me through a long corridor composed almost entirely of smoke-stained stucco. Eventually I was deposited into Customs. A line of perhaps twenty travelers had already formed in front of a Plexiglas cube. Inside, a tired-looking Customs officer sat on a stool, glaring indiscreetly at passports. Not long after, a second officer entered an additional cube, gesturing for a new line to form. No one moved. It was only when the

officer, now visibly irritated, sprang from his booth and began pointing at the floor, that the accused began to shuffle slowly forward.

“Avancez!” the officer yelled directly at me, as if I were the dimwitted leader of this group. He advanced a step, sweeping his arm like a gorilla. “Avancez, mettez-vous là! Mettez-vous là!” he continued, pointing once again at the floor, which contained a barely discernible yellow line. He then returned to his cubicle.

I cautiously approached the window. The officer opened and closed my passport, as if he were inspecting a factory component, and just as quickly returned the document to me. In disbelief, I proceeded forward. I had expected at least the same level of suspicion shown by the American security officials, who had ordered me to remove my belt and shoes before passing through an expensive scanner.

I paused for a moment to clean my glasses, and then stepped onto another slidewalk that I assumed would take me to Baggage. This conveyor, the belt of which was made of warped and patched rubber, ascended fitfully to the second floor. It was enclosed by a roof of Plexiglas

tubing similar to that one might find in a gerbil cage. Indeed, the vast atrium through which I was now ascending contained similar connecting tubes attached to various floors.

I had always considered myself a man out of time, but this was ridiculous. Even the strange tone that emanated from the PA system before an announcement was made did well to promote some topsy-turvy world only beginning to reveal itself.

I waited in Baggage for quite some time before the battered luggage-track began to move. Luckily enough, my suitcase and cardboard cocoon were the first items to be expelled. Thinking this a harbinger of good fortune, I did not bother to make a thorough inspection.

I proceeded through the geriatric spaceship in search of an exit. This turned into a rather circuitous walk, but finally I found the sign I was looking for. The automatic sensor of a sliding door detected my presence, but not quickly enough, and I nearly smacked bodily into the glass. I strained precariously on my toes and then finally stumbled from the ship, expecting to find a prefabricated lunar landscape. But there was nothing of the kind.

Encouraged, I proceeded through a rather elaborate queue rail, seemingly the only route to a line of waiting taxis. I nodded to a thin old man leaning against a sporty Peugeot.

“Monsieur,” the driver nodded in kind before hefting my things into the trunk. He then graciously opened the rear door for me, mumbling all the while in his native tongue. I had no idea what he was saying, though it sounded both unique and pleasant.

Once situated in the back seat, I smiled and said, “Jardin de Paris Saint-Germain, sil vous plaît.” This was one of perhaps ten phrases I had put to memory in the weeks preceding my departure. The old man nodded and then fell into a stunning diatribe. I smiled at everything that was said, but understood nothing.

As the Peugeot merged onto the freeway, the radio (tuned to a station playing American pop music) drowned out the old man’s voice. I stared through the window for nearly the entire drive into Paris, glancing occasionally in the rearview mirror to see if the old man was spying on me. For the time being, he seemed pleasantly distracted by the voice of David Hasselhoff. It

was obvious that the old man performed the same excursion into Paris (and back again) many times a day.

The landscape, to my mind, was only slightly less decrepit than the outer rim of Chicago, which resembled nothing less than a nightmarish wasteland. In all fairness, though, the outskirts of Paris were like that of any other metropolitan city, littered with factories, apartment high-rises, and garbage dumps. For nearly twenty minutes I gazed at the receding landscape in a kind of despondent stupor. My impression thus far was the complete opposite from what I had imagined, and Monsieur Hasselhoff was getting on my nerves.

It was not until we entered the city proper, though, that I began to fear for my life. Indeed, my palms began to sweat and my shoulders turned to stone. I had always heard that Paris was one of perhaps a dozen cities in the world that one should avoid renting a vehicle, and now I understood why. There seemed to be no designated lanes, but rather a continual wall of traffic three rows wide. Motorbikes, a seemingly fearless breed, buzzed in and out of traffic.

I had little time to take in the splendor of the

magnificent buildings around me. My gaze shifted frenetically to and fro, as though every approaching vehicle represented a means to my end. There was a mad synchronicity going on here, like the order one finds in a cavalry of marching ants.

Meeting the old man's gaze in the rear-view mirror, I could tell that he was deriving great pleasure from my anxiety. All at once he reached to the opposite seat, his eyes momentarily blind to the road. He pulled a dog-eared manual from the door pocket and began to flip casually through its pages. Had I known more than a dozen words of French, I would have berated the old man for not keeping his full attention on the road. At one point he nearly crosschecked a Smart Car.

The old man flipped to a page in his booklet. A moment later, he turned into a side street that wasn't much wider than the Peugeot and made a speedway dash to Jardin de Paris, where I had reserved a room.

By the time I stepped onto the cobbled street, the old man had already withdrawn my luggage. I handed over forty euros to cover the fare. He reached into his pocket to retrieve change, but I patted him on the shoulder and

nodded gratefully. In that brief moment I felt as though I had just had my first meaningful interaction with a resident of this strange metropolis.