

24 Frames

Illinois Emerging Writers Competition

James Jones Short Story Award Submission

2,995 words

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There was a lot of silence that morning, even once we arrived at the *Invalides* station to take the C line to Versailles. Cloudy and cool, it was the kind of day where only a calendar convinces one it is early May and not late September. Happily I had brought a jacket along, a vintage brown leather one purchased at a thrift store the previous autumn. Though it had a half-inch rip in the left pocket, I didn't care: I had paid five dollars for it, and I could always repair the tear.

It was early, rush hour somewhere, but there wasn't much reverse commuting going on, so on our side of the tracks it was just the two of us and some tourists from Germany. I was excited, if not fully awake, and my thoughts ran rampant about the treasures I would soon see. Although she had lived in Paris several years prior and surely knew better, Estella hadn't brought a coat, so I held her close in the chill and the calm, with one arm around her and the other reaching into my pocket where my hand held my small camera and an extra roll of film.

This was a year before I bought my first professional camera, and I was using a little point-and-shoot, the kind one manually advances using the thumb-wheel that sounds like a ratchet. I took out the camera and told her to ready herself. I posed her, making certain the sign pointing the way to the palace was in the background of the shot. I am not a fan of people looking at the camera, preferring— then as now — to manipulate a frame so that the viewer feels he or she is seeing a stolen moment in the life of an

unaware subject. I snapped, advanced the film, and with the Germans looking for the ratchet, put the camera back in my packet.

A sound only slightly less conspicuous quickly broke the silence again when a youth of Arabic descent came down the steps onto our side of the platform, rapping in French. It was a silly rhyme, and I only remember the melody, but it sounded like something one would sing to amuse a baby, or else to punish one. Estella and I looked at each other and laughed, and we held each other closely; she and I and the camera.

When the train finally approached, the rumble of the wheels on the track drowned out the young man's flow. As it slowed and at last stopped he didn't get on with the rest of us, as if insulted by the interruption. Instead, continuing his rap, he looked down the line for the next train, the one that would take him not to Versailles, but to one of Paris' poorer suburbs. Conscious of framing an artsy shot, I took his picture as he watched the rails. Then the train lurched and let out an arthritic moan, and we left the boy there with the grey clouds as his audience while we rolled on to more splendid pastures, where one can pay to visit but never to live.

Moving inward we found two empty seats. We had to sit across from one another, Estella next to a teenage girl and I next to that girl's mother. After the kind of minimal pleasantries that mask the disappointment one feels when finding out the seat next to the will be taken, neither the mother nor the daughter spoke, not to each other and not to us. Although I was jovial and fully awake by now, I too spoke minimally because the contrast between my spirits and the dour boredom of our seating mates was quite loud enough. I occasionally glanced at them, counting the things at home to which familiarity had made me a zombie, as it had done to these two women sharing our compartment on

the train to Versailles. Otherwise I took in the changing landscape as Estella stooped in her seat so she could put her feet between mine.

We arrived a little before 8 AM and decided to eat breakfast in the little café outside the station. There were half a dozen other people in there, not many, but the clanking of their utensils made one think of a wedding reception at a banquet hall. The waitress came and took our orders, and when she returned ten minutes later and placed the plates in front of us, she said "Voila!" It was the first time I had heard someone who wasn't in a movie say that, and I reacted as if I had waited my whole life for it; as if it was a magic word that would unlock all of my hopes from the boundaries of dreams. I smiled and gave a coffee toast to her, commending her in English for a meal I had yet to taste but which was doubtless delicious, as even the most bland of foods are when you are eating them in a far away place. I no longer remember what I had, but Estella took a photo of me eating it.

We ate quickly, paid, and exited the restaurant, deciding it would be better to relax only after we were at the front of the line into the estate. But walking the ten or so minutes toward the palace we could see the crowds were already gathering, thicker than the day-after-Thanksgiving-sale crowds back home. Perhaps that was why the café had been so empty – everyone wanted to be first -- but where had all these people come from? While the train had been full, it was not enough so as to have held the number of people who now amassed in the courtyard before the great chateau of the kings. We wouldn't be first; we wouldn't even be one-thousand-and-first. So we slowed our walk to an amble and moved towards the end of the line for the State Apartments tour as the long-tardy sun emerged at last like a bashful child. I took a good look at the enormous

façade of the palace for the first time. The sun wrapped around all the ornamental curves on the face of the building like an exploded spotlight, and the palace seemed to fill its chest with air. I was occupied for some minutes taking photographs. Buildings never look into the camera.

Alas, one can only personify and admire a building for so long. I began to realize just how long the lines to get into the palace were. I was reminded of the people in countries like Poland, people who had suddenly found themselves to be Communists and as a result now waited in lines like these for bread. Luckily I was on vacation and, rather than starvation, my great discomfort was simply boredom. Perhaps I was now even as bored as the mother and daughter we had encountered on the train. I began to practice the Spanish curse words I had picked up over the course of my life. Estella hushed me in embarrassment, as if they might hear me the next country over, the one that was responsible for her first language. But no one was really listening, and though it took me three more years to realize it, neither was she.

Eventually we came to the front and paid our admission, and we entered into a place of such opulence that I cannot even now quite comprehend. Suffice to say my boredom was alleviated. I saw ceilings that would make giants feel small and colors even the blind could see. Each new room seemed to progress to a new style of architecture and design: gilded Baroque, pastel Rococo, the type of beauty that made me want to lick the walls to see what they tasted like. Estella had visited Versailles before when she worked as an au pair, but one must visit a dozens of times before it ceases to be new. We moved from room to room like lovers in a play with the most theatrical set. We held hands throughout, letting go only when I saw a good photo.

The most famous room in the entire chateau is the Hall of Mirrors, of which I had seen numerous pictures before – all of which seemed to have Woodrow Wilson in them, blocking something more beautiful to look at. There are 357 mirrors placed in 17 arcades that match the 17 windows on the opposite wall. This effect manages to be both fragile and overwhelming at the same time. The hall is located between the Salon de la Guerre at its northern end and by the Salon de la Paix at its southern end. As we approached the middle of the 250 foot long room, Estella asked a middle-aged man to take our picture together, her tongue slithering through choices of languages like a hydra until it found the correct one.

*“Pourriez-vous nous prendre en photo s’il vous plait?”*

The man took his time, like me, finding the right angle. He knew it was to be the most important photo of the roll, the two young lovers embracing in the magical place between war and peace where everything is balanced and the way forward is illuminated. We looked into the camera, and as he finally snapped she whispered she loved me, and the sound ricocheted and echoed off the mirrors and the statues that stood guard and it was the grandest thing among all that grandeur. That’s how one feels when one is young and at Versailles. The man handed back the camera, we thanked him over the sound of the ratchet, and he disappeared from our lives, walking from mirror to mirror, away and away and away and away.

Because there is so much to see at Versailles and the mind finally stops trying to remember it all, the last room I have a distinct memory of was the Salon of Abundance, a name which must not have been given lightly as any room within the walls of the palace could be named either Abundance or Indulgence. In fact, I may not even have seen the

room but perhaps just read the name. Exiting the immense building past the Queen's and Noble's wings, I did not contemplate there might somewhere within have also been a Salon of Scarcity, or one of Limitation. That thought would come later.

Behind the palace, a promenade leads to the Grande Canal, and beyond it, are the grounds of the Chateau of Versailles. Panning across with my eyes, I realized that the entire palace itself was only a façade for the endless, geometric greenness before us. The grounds were like a series of golf courses on steroids. Camera at the ready, Estella and I strolled down the avenues of foliage. As we walked I thought of Antoinette – she could have hid forever out there, she and her head.

Eventually we decided to lay beside each other off one of the million secluded paths, though the ground was damp and the clouds had returned. Estella drifted off into a light sleep, and I lay there listening alternately to her breath and the distant sounds of someone else's laughter. When a hiking family walked passed us, she awoke and I held the camera at arms length to shoot another photo of the two of us together, the kind that is by nature a grotesque close-up yielding no clues as to location. We stood and walked for an hour, photographing each other among the trees or one of the smaller fountains most visitors never find. The roll was over after that. I rewound the film and put in the new roll as we made our way back towards the palace and toward the Grand Canal, where we rented a boat.

Neither Estella nor I were very adept oarsman, but I eventually managed a minimum of control; enough to avoid the other boats. Like a wounded manatee, off we rowed, slightly to the left for the entire length of the canal. A favorite photo is of my youthful, panicked face – taken right as I let go of an oar and it slipped into the canal.

But my lifeguard skills were on that day, and it stayed afloat long enough so I could save it from drowning.

Of all the super-sized things at Versailles, I think proportionately the largest must be the goldfish in the canal. They looked like small whales gasping for air, their huge mouths trained to stay open as if trying to pull food scraps into their gravity from the hands of leisurely people. I was afraid I'd hit them with the paddle, angering their mother who would rise from the depths like a leviathan in anger. When I took their photos, they seemed angry, as though they expected tribute for the recording of their images.

The boat was due back in an hour, and given the way I rowed we decided we should start heading in. I paused a minute and pulled the oars in. I moved towards Estella and we kissed, the boat twisting slowly in the water as serious boaters with hyper-defined triceps sped passed, swearing at us in French for being in the way and for being in love.

The day had been full and filled with joy but as we docked it was getting later and colder. We decided to finish off with a quick walk around the *l'orangerie* and the grounds closest to the palace. Here, off the *Alle de la Reine*, I put my hands into my pockets for warmth. There is a feeling one gets at great heights as one looks down over a borderless edge and briefly considers they might well fall, a certain uncomfortable gasp within the heart. It's the same feeling one gets upon the discovery that he has inadvertently switched pockets at some point during the day and that his exposed film has fallen through the hole in the left pocket of his vintage brown leather jacket.

In disbelief I reached further down, turning the jacket out and raising it up a bit as I did so, and my fingers poked through the tear and wiggled, like something from a Charlie Chaplin two-reeler. As I did this Estella, who had been walking a few paces ahead, turned back. She saw the alarm on my face as I looked first at her, then back at my fingers as they twitched through the slit. I held them there, and stared at them as if caught in slow moment, as if I could have retraced my steps to find the film before time realized what had happened.

We looked for the missing roll until darkness bled over the top of the palace onto the grounds and the ghosts of the kings returned from the hunt. We looked in the immediate area and we looked in distant areas. And we looked in vain. Whatever luck I had was used up in the recovery of the drowning oar – that’s what I believed then. Though my anxiety had been contagious and she was disappointed, Estella got over it quickly. “We’ll come back someday,” her smile seemed to say, “and we’ll have a lifetime of vacations to far away places.’ But I was inconsolable, dragging my feet the whole way back to the train as she pulled me behind her like an infant who hadn’t yet mastered the art of walking.

Estella slept on the train back to Paris. This time, we sat next to each other. With her head on my shoulder I thought about sleeping on trains, and how it is oddly comforting. For although one is in the bowels of a machine, the heartbeat matches the wheels as they press over new sections of track and the symmetry of the rhythm entrances one. I was happy to have such thoughts to distract me, because looking out the window I couldn’t see much, only the streetlights and the graffiti. I began to feel

resigned to what had happened, if not fully convinced that the actual memories of the day would suffice than photographic evidence.

After Versailles, after Paris, we moved south, on to other parts of the country. Warmer parts where I didn't need a jacket and all my film was tucked securely into functioning pockets in other clothing. After two weeks we returned home, and I took the remaining 11 rolls to be developed and printed. But I felt the emptiness of the missing 12<sup>th</sup> roll, the gap in the sequence between Paris and Dijon, where the lost shots of Versailles should have been.

Where are my photographs now? Did someone pick up the roll and develop them, making up stories about the tourists in the frames? Or are they hidden still beneath some immaculate shrub near the fountains, disintegrating as they wait? Perhaps they were destroyed or discarded by the formidable maintenance crew, people oblivious to their roles as the grim-reapers of memory.

Who are the people in those photographs? Did they cry out not to be left behind as they were dropped in their tiny cylindrical coffin? Did they encounter a different history than the couple who left Versailles that one May night; a better one, since they had been composed and arranged within the sequence of frames rather than being subjected to the whims of life? Would I recognize myself now? Would she? How sorrowful I become when I think of that roll of film and remember that, like each frame, each memory is numbered and that, ironically, the things we lose hover over us with a crushing heaviness that impedes the beating of the heart.

Fate is the sun king, so bored and controlling. It yawns on its throne in the court of my past, where it used me as a prop, and wrote for me a history that 24 frames could never have foreseen.

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