

Matt Levin

Scarlett turned to me and wondered aloud, “why do you Americans always need to work so much?”

“Huh,” I heard her even as the train rumbles through the Paris underground. It just caught me off-guard.

Americans? No, no. I wanted to explain to her, it’s just me. I’m the one who always has to be busy. I’m the one who’s always late for everything. I’m the one who will stay in on weekends because I’ve buried myself in work.

I mumbled a reply about nothing in particular. Probably to try to change the subject, and I started picking at what remained of the cous-cous and egg she had made as we were running out the door.

Rushing. Rushing. Why am I always rushing? Rushing. Rushing. Sometimes I can hear the world whizzing by me. *Whoosh.*

I slunk into the darkness of the theatre and tried to slither by the legs into my seat.

“Oh, you found it.” Cathy Haill whispered. Only five minutes late to this week’s play. Not bad.

Each week this class watches a play in London. Professor Haill keeps talking about how plays can force new perspectives. Playwrights love to play with how one sees things. For example, one Alan Ayckbourn love story consists of a set where the audience sees a woman’s apartment, the feet of the tenants living above her and the top of a man painting the ceiling on the floor below the woman. Another called, “The Women In Black,” needed only two actors, some rickety chairs and boxes and ominous lighting to create a terrifying theatre experience. It’s fascinating.

Hmm, this play is getting good. I should try to relax.

“We don’t drink to get drunk like you do in America,” Carol said. I gestured to everyone around us and stated the obvious: “but everybody’s drunk here.”

“Yes, but we don’t drink to get drunk. We drink to celebrate.”

Oh, that actually made sense. I had never seen anybody play an accordion while plastered in a bar in America.

Carol and her roommate had taken me and my flatmate Will to the soul of Porto. College students gathered in the square. Dressed in black robes, like something out of the world of Harry Potter, they stood in circles swaying and bopping to the beats of the students playing guitar or violin or...accordion? The oldest students carried huge wooden spoons.

I've never seen a drinking culture like this in America. Maybe we don't have one. It's not our fault. We just haven't *had* time. America's only been around for three hundred years. Porto has had more than a millennium to build tradition.

My time in Porto lasted 36 hours. Only 36 fantastic hours. And I was swept up again in my own world.

Whoosh

The Irish Journalist was just like me. I mean, he dressed nicer. He liked football. I liked...football (the other one). But boiled down to essentials, here we were: Two twenty-something males, sportswriters, disillusioned with the idea of a 9 to 5 desk job and both of us had managed to finagle our way into covering an NBA preseason game in London. The Irish Journalist was just like me. It was cool to meet someone different—who was like me.

Then, the buzzer rang. I was on deadline.

Bzzz. (I mean, *whoosh*).

“Oh there you are,” James Boys said looking up from his attendance sheet. Only a minute late. But I'm out of breath. I sprinted from the tube to the school. I shouldn't be this worn out. Wait, am I...am I sweating? That's not cool. I saunter over to my seat and slump down.

“Please don't feel like this is an anti-American class,” Professor Boys reiterated. “This is about seeing America from a different viewpoint.” This class wasn't anti-American. It was America: A Foreign Perspective.

I liked this perspective. OK, I didn't agree with all the time. But I saw things I never saw before. I saw things in ways I never saw them before. It forced me to see culture, to see people, to see politics from angles you aren't used to thinking. And once you can start thinking about one thing in a completely new way. Then, it's easier to see another thing a new way. And another thing. And another thing. It's easier to understand.

But I'm not seeing anything right now. I'm sprinting to class again. The wind whips in my face.

Whoosh. (That's cold.)

I'm fluent in English. Louise is fluent in French. Gabriel was our translator. He was also a big fan of Bob Marley and Michael Jordan.

This was a birthday party for Scarlett's roommate. Louise sat on the floor and kept wanting to talk to me about Obama. Gabby told me Louise asked me where I was when Obama won the election. Gabby told me Louise asked me how I thought Obama would change America. Louise rubbed her eyes and mentioned Obama once more. Gabby told me Louise cried when she found out Obama won the election.

"I understood that time."

There was no rushing this time. Just four relaxing days of looking around Paris. Loving it.

Once in Madrid. I watched my roommate Stef converse with an Italian in the kitchen of our host's house. Stef didn't know Italian. The Italian didn't know English. So they connected through Spanish. I want to do that.

"Helloooooo latecomer," Christopher Cook bellowed. Twenty minutes late? How was that possible? Wait, this class starts at 9 a.m. How is everybody else always on time? Stop fussing.

OK.

Professor Cook was talking about film—how every angle, every set piece, every movement is deliberate. Same with every image in the paper. Or on a newscast. This was a visual issues course. The class tells us to not just see things. But to open your eyes. Stop. Look around.

I did. I finally did in Europe.

That's why I could appreciate Amsterdam, a lawless, circus of a city where nothing makes sense. Sometimes everything does. I've never witnessed any place like it before

That's how I met the Iranian woman atop the Eiffel Tower. Her name meant "beautiful lotus flower." She spoke five languages: Persian, English, Russian, French and Arabic. She wore an orange coat and a purple scarf around her neck.

That's what made me try ostrich in London, octopus in Barcelona and drink Mahou in Madrid with our host named Lolo.

Fine, I'll admit it. I'm not that busy.

I like to procrastinate. I let work pile up, and pretend I'm busier than I really am. Finish it at the last second and then rush. Sometimes when I'm not rushing, I don't even like to look around. Instead, I walk quickly, my face obscured by a hood so nobody will bother me. I hate when people come up to me in the GAP and ask me if I need any help.

It's my routine. I stick with a few close friends. Arrive late to parties. Avoid talking to anybody I don't know. It makes me comfortable.

London didn't make me realize this desire to fling myself into other cultures. It made me realize I could do it. If it wasn't for my classes, for my roommates, for people like the Irish Journalist, Lolo or Scarlett—the girl who reached out to me in Paris without me ever needing to ask.

These situations make me uncomfortable. Those situations have been the most fun I've had in Europe. To see something in a whole new perspective—it's mind-blowing.

America's less than two weeks away, and I feel myself being sucked back into the bubble. This is not an anti-American paper. It's anti-my routine—back there.

Unlike in France, I can barely muster a hello (“bonjour”) to strangers in America. Even if I do, I can't keep up a conversation (“au revoir”).

Unlike in Spain, I won't have time to chat with waiters (“hola”). Even if I do, I feel I'll lose interest (“hasta luego”).

Unlike in Portugal, I can't strike up a conversation with street vendors (“bom dia”). Even if I do, I feel like we're all the same tradition-less Americans, and we're wasting each others time (“adeus”).

I'll try (“Hello”).

But I can feel it already. Feel myself rushing again. Always rushing. Rushing. And I feel it all passing me by.

(Goodbye...*whoosh*)