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Notre Dame

Cathedral, oh Cathedral, impact so permanent, the timeless statues, the ceiling untouchable, the ancient bénitier filled with holy water sparkling with each and every glint of light, sanctity in each corner; this was the backdrop, and the tourists meandering were dancers, the arches with their continuous smooth curves, their intricate designs along each edge remencent of Roman occupation holding the ceiling well into the sky, the stories told through the glint of the stained glass windows inviting viewers into scenes from thousands of years ago, and just outside the photographers ready to snap a photo of you in the shadow of the Cathedral before you even have time to realize the scam. This was the human experience of being brought into the distant past, leaving the present, forgetting every pressure, considering the events that had taken place here over the many years prior, considering the holiness in the air and the encounter that had taken place while also consider the untold stories buried deep within the walls, the beauty and horrors that have taken place beneath the towering smooth arches and color stained light.

 Paris is loud, busy, and bustling. The courtyard just outside Notre-Dame was packed. You could tell who the tourists were based on the white tennis shoes and oversized cameras hanging from their necks. Many of them had brochures in their hands, and they looked pitifully lost. In addition to tourists, the courtyard was packed with hundreds of overly confident pigeons on the hunt for an afternoon snack.

 A bride, groom, and more photographers than one might think were necessary, stood near the door of the cathedral. The wind was strong and the brides’ veil kept flying in front of her face. The photographers were flustered as they tried to scatter the pigeons that repeatedly congregated around the couple. The photoshoot looked stressful, but just behind them sat Notre Dame. Standing strong, confident, and oh so still. Her beauty was not tainted by the fumbling around her.

I had just arrived in Paris four hours before. Having hardly had time to tidy my appearance after flying internationally, I was deeply insecure as I walked the historic cobblestone streets. I was wearing a loose gray drawstring jacket and some painfully unflattering jeans. My hair was not behaving and my makeup had been thrown on haphazardly. I wanted to take photos as I walked the streets, but I felt like a swollen bean with messy hair and was deeply self conscious about the opinions of those around me. What people say about Parisians’ strong fashion sense is absolutely true. I could feel the judgmental gaze of these sophisticated French women like daggers as I walked. In every sense of the word, I looked like a messy, trashy, stereotypical American tourist. My less than put together look caused me to stand out like a sore thumb.

But in Notre Dame, my gaze was pulled off of myself and onto the splendor of my surroundings. With the height of the ceiling, the drop of a pen could easily echo through the entire building. Upon entering the cathedral, my sense of hearing became keenly attuned. The gentle resounding hum of a choir echoed around, inviting me to leave my own concerns at the door and enter into something much bigger. A gentle and mysterious stillness inhabited the place. A stillness that demands silence of the hearts of every visitor. The sort of stillness that causes you to become painfully aware of every sound within your own soul. Quiet is violent. Stillness, like a punch to the throat

The nations were represented in Notre Dame that day. Languages from all over the globe could be heard. In one corner I heard Maderin, in another French, and another English. Under one spectacular roof was a host of individuals that had come from all over the world to experience the beauty that Notre Dame had to offer.

As I walked through the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, I couldn‘t help but tilt my head back in awe and wonder to admire the strength and towering height of the ceiling. Whether I looked to the left, right, or ahead, every aspect of this architecture inspired an overwhelming appreciation. My heart overflowed as I walked and admired. I didn’t want to leave. I could feel the holiness in the air and I was overcome with a sense of nostalgia from events that had taken place before I'd even been born.

Aside from the sporadically placed candles, the primary light source was from sunlight, shining through the stained glass windows. As the warm light steamed through, it caused the pillars to cast long, heavy shadows through the walkways. On one of the walls was a life size iron sculpture depicting Christ, hanging naked on the cross. His body was contorted and his face twisted in agony. With the placement of the windows, no natural light was ever able to hit his drooping body, only the light of a single spotlight hit him. The light caused his body to cast a shadow, which emphasized how far he was leaning away outward. He was frozen in this moment of pain, pulling away from his cross, but not far enough to see the sun.

As I walked through the Cathedral, my mind was filled with God. From my heart overflowed prayers of thanksgiving and praise. I felt spiritual, as I walked, like the many pilgrims who had made their journey to this very place. This same God that Catholics had come to worship in this building for hundreds of years, was the God I had asked into my heart at the tender and innocent age of four. The same God that I had promised to serve, had been worshiped here for hundreds of years. I could feel the weight from centuries of adoration pressing against my chest. And here, 17 year old me had the opportunity to add to the worship.

If Notre-Dame could hear, I would ask her if I was enough. If my life was pleasing to God. As I walked through that hallowed place, did she take me seriously, or deem me unworthy as the beautiful parisian women had. I would ask her to share her secrets; all the things she had seen and heard over the years. I would ask her to trust me, as one trusts a childhood confidant. I would ask her what beauty and strength mean and how, after so long, she had the courage to continue to stand so tall.