

*Freely inspired by*  
*Alexander Pushkin's verse novel*  
Eugene Onegin (1837)  
*and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's opera*  
Eugene Onegin (1879)

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In  
Paris  
With  
you

*Clémentine Beauvais*

Translated from the French  
by Sam Taylor



90 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

FABER & FABER



*Don't talk to me of love. Let's talk of Paris,  
The little bit of Paris in our view.  
There's that crack across the ceiling  
And the hotel walls are peeling  
And I'm in Paris with you.*

James Fenton, 'In Paris With You'



1

Because their story didn't end at the right time, in the  
right place,

because they let their feelings go to waste,  
it was written, I think, that Eugene and Tatiana  
would find each other  
ten years later,  
one morning in winter,  
under terra firma,

on the Meteor, Line 14 (magenta) of the

Paris

Metro.

It was quarter to nine.

Imagine Eugene, dressed up fine: black corduroys,  
pale blue check Oxford shirt, sensible collar, charcoal  
tweed jacket, a grey scarf,  
probably cashmere, frayed at the ends,

wrapped once,  
twice  
around his neck – and above this hung a face  
that had softened  
since the last time;  
a face written more loosely,  
a face less harsh, and more patient.  
Suppler, gentler.  
A face rinsed clean of its adolescence;  
the face of a young man  
    who had learned to stifle his impatience,  
a young man who had learned how to wait.

Tatiana, funnily enough,  
had been thinking about him the previous evening.  
Which might seem an amazing coincidence,  
except that she often thought about him  
    – and I'm sure that  
    you, too, can brood and mope,  
    sometimes, about love affairs  
    that went wrong years ago.  
The pain's not worse after ten years.  
It doesn't necessarily increase with time.  
    It's not

an investment,  
you know,  
regret.

Lost love doesn't have to be a tragedy.

There's not always enough material there for a story.

But for these two,  
I'll make an exception, if you don't mind.  
Look how shaken they are to find  
each other again.

Look at their eyes . . .

'Eugene, hi, haven't seen you for ages!'

beamed Tatiana, a pretty good actress.

He sat down next to her; the seat was still warm.

On the black window reflecting his face,

a sleeper's forehead had stamped

a little circle of grease

like the watermark on a banknote.

A record of time spent,                      now disappearing.

Tatiana could see herself in the window too,

at an angle, as the train sped up, roaring.

The sudden surges, sharp bends and screeching stops of

Line 14 are notoriously vicious. It's hard to stand up or chat

or read. But it does have an upside: it takes you from your

first stop

to your last

fast.

As they rushed from one place to another, Tatiana stared at the window that reflected him and her together.

Eugene yelled:

'So how are things? I had no idea  
you were pregnant . . .'

She wasn't.

And yet, it was difficult to contradict Eugene at that moment, since on her duffle coat was a massive badge, and on that badge a baby grinned, a big white speech bubble proudly declaring in capital letters:

BABY ON BOARD!

And in smaller letters, just below:

THANK YOU FOR GIVING ME YOUR SEAT.

So it was only logical that Eugene (who was feeling somewhat upset by this news, and surprised to be upset, and a bit confused) should come to this conclusion.

There was an explanation,  
which could not be given then and there:  
that because empty seats were so rare  
on the Paris metro between eight  
and nine a.m.,

Tatiana had, a few months before,  
bought this VIP (very impregnated person) pass,  
her guarantee of a place to rest her bum.  
She loved seeing all those kind  
ladies and gentlemen  
spot her badge and leap to their feet  
as if their seat  
were on fire.  
She would thank them, flashing  
soft Virgin Mary smiles.

And since there was nothing secret about her condition,  
it often set off shouted conversations  
about baby names,

and baby clothes,  
and giving birth, and epidurals,  
and nurseries,  
and breastfeeding,

and so on, and so on.  
She'd had to do some research into the mysteries of

maternity.

She needed a coherent story,  
for at that time of day, it was often the same  
passengers standing/swaying/sitting  
in the train carriage.  
She couldn't claim one day that she was  
four months gone with twins,  
and the next that it was a little girl with Down's  
that she and her husband had decided to keep,  
and the day after *that* that it was  
a miracle child, conceived after eight rounds of IVE,  
and the day after *that* that she was  
a surrogate mother for two gay men.

No one would believe her if her story kept changing.  
This need for precision was the price she had to pay  
for a free seat every day . . . until spring,  
when she could ride a Vélib' to the National Library  
without shivering.

'Who's the father?' asked Eugene.  
'The father? His name's Murray.'  
'Murray? Do I know him?'  
'No, I don't think so – he's British,'  
said Tatiana, who had just invented him.

For a moment they were silent.  
Then Tatiana paid him a compliment:  
‘You look very elegant!’  
‘Ah, thank you,’ Eugene replied.  
‘I’m going to my grandfather’s funeral.’  
‘Oh! That’s great!’ said Tatiana,  
who obviously hadn’t given herself  
enough time to process this information.

Next station:  
*Gare de Lyon.*

To the right, on the other side of  
the tracks, a lush tropical forest suddenly appeared  
behind glass.

(I remember how,  
aged seven or eight,  
I used to daydream  
about seeing snakes  
and monkeys in there.)

The doors slid open and a voice, automated,  
intimated  
in three languages, no less,  
that passengers should exit from the left side of the train.  
*Bajada por el lado izquierdo.*

(When I was young and everything  
was new and a source of wonder,  
I used to ponder  
what kind of aliens this obscure message was addressing.  
*'It's in case there are any Spaniards on the train,'*  
my father explained.  
*'So they know where to get off.'*  
I wasn't sure what Spaniards were.  
I imagined them tall and rubbery,  
I don't know why.  
For months,  
whenever we came into the Gare de Lyon, I would watch,  
heart pounding, hands clasping my skirt, eager  
for a glimpse of those elastic creatures,  
who,  
disobeying the train man's very clear directive,  
would open the door jungle side and vanish, undetected,  
into the forest of palms.)

\*\*\*\*\*

But let's get back to our two passengers.  
Their memories are more important than mine.  
They have things to tell each other that they can't articulate.

So they say other stuff, though of course it barely conceals  
what's really on their minds.

One of those cowardly conversations,  
on this and that and the weather,  
avoiding the heart of the matter.

That's what happens when everything has gone to waste:  
we can't say it out loud;  
we chicken out.

Thankfully someone inside us speaks in our place.

'So what about you? Where are you going?'

Eugene asked politely.

'To the National Library. Like I do  
every morning,

at precisely

the same time . . . you know,

if by any chance you're planning to make the same trip  
tomorrow . . .'

*He's going to the cemetery, you idiot!*

Tatiana yelled at herself inside her head.

Thankfully,

it was fine:

Eugene didn't notice her blunder,  
busy as he was trying to remember

what he was supposed to be doing  
tomorrow at quarter to nine.

‘What are you up to in the library?’

‘I’m working on my thesis.

I’m in the last year of my PhD.’

‘Oh yeah? What’s your thesis about?’

‘History of art. It’s on Caillebotte.

Gustave Caillebotte.’

Then she shifted into autopilot:

*Don’t worry, no one knows anything about Caillebotte . . .*

‘Don’t worry, no one knows anything about Caillebotte. He was a nineteenth-century artist – a painter and collector, theoretically part of the Impressionist movement, but in fact his paintings are much more precise, more classical in a way – you might have seen one of his more famous pictures: a view of Paris in the rain, Haussmann-style buildings like a ship’s bow, with a man and a woman under an umbrella . . .’

‘I know,

I know,’

Eugene interrupted.

‘I know exactly who Caillebotte is,’ he muttered.

‘Ah! Perfect.

Well then, you know everything.’

To her chagrin, Tatiana felt that this declaration  
somehow carried the implication  
that her thesis didn't really

amount to much.

Not wishing to leave Eugene with this impression,  
she started to describe to him,

with a level of detail  
that might seem excessive,  
part of her third chapter,  
still largely hypothetical at this stage,  
about the representation of water  
in Caillebotte's art; in this chapter,  
Tatiana demonstrated,  
in a boldly rhetorical way,  
that the liquid elements  
in Caillebotte's paintings

– rivers, bathwater, rain –

were a sort of discreet reply  
to the stodgy, spongy daubings  
of certain other artists  
around at the same time.

\*\*\*\*\*

When she finished this explanation,  
the train howled to a stop  
at the National Library metro station.  
Eugene got off too.

‘Is your funeral near here?’ asked Tatiana,  
not very tactfully.

‘It’s at the Kremlin-Bicêtre cemetery.  
I’m going to walk. I have plenty of time.’

They stood in silence on the escalator,  
Tatiana leaning clumsily to the right,  
turned backwards  
so she could face Eugene,  
her right foot in front of her left  
to hide the ladder  
in her tights.

Eugene seemed pensive.

Tatiana noticed  
some fine lines on his brow  
that had not been there last time,  
though she might have anticipated their arrival  
because of all the frowning he used to do ten years ago  
to express his disapproval.

\*\*\*\*\*

As a teen he'd disapproved of everything –  
the boy was always bored –  
while she'd been too easily pleased  
and lost in a daydream.

She wondered vaguely if she was still in love with him.

'It'd be nice to see each other again,' Eugene told her  
halfway up the escalator.

As this sentence prompted a thousand questions,  
Tatiana asked none of them  
and concentrated instead  
on the immediate perils of her ascension:  
her left arm,

pulled by the handrail,

was escaping upwards,

faster

than the steps.

She checked that her scarf was not dragging on the floor,  
to make sure it wouldn't choke her at the end of the ride.

(She'd seen a video of a similar incident  
on the Internet.

The guy died.)

'Can I have your number?' Eugene asked.

'Of course,' she said, reciting it digit by digit.

He texted her so she would have his too.

She already had it.

Apparently he hadn't changed his number

in the past ten years.

Apparently he hadn't kept hers.

'How's Olga?' Eugene asked casually,

as they were elbowing their way towards the  
turnstiles.

'Oh . . . fine, you know. She's got two daughters now.'

'Ah, cool! They'll be cousins to yours, I mean.'

Tatiana had momentarily forgotten the whole story with  
the badge.

This was her chance to come clean:

'Listen, I'm not really pregnant. I just bought this  
thing

so I'd get a seat on the metro every morning.'

Eugene threw his head back and laughed.

But the laughter surprised him

because it was more than laughter.

It gave Eugene the feeling

that he was

like a snowdrop or something,  
one of those flowers that break  
through the white winter crust

and suddenly breathe the icy air.

The laughter of someone who, until that laugh,  
must not have been truly aware  
that he was alive.

'I did think you were a bit young for that kind of  
responsibility.'

'People always feel too young for responsibility,'  
said Tatiana. 'Any kind.

A kitten, a bonsai tree . . .

Keeping your ticket  
till the end of your journey.'

She sighed as if to herself. 'I have to use tickets now.  
I didn't renew my Navigo card – I've got no murray at the  
moment.'

'No murray?'

'No money.

Damn it,

I don't know why

I can't speak properly today.'

'But no Murray either?' Eugene ventured.

'No Murray either, no. Murray

was an underground invention.'  
Eugene smiled and nodded, alarmed at the realisation  
that the mere  
idea  
of brushing against Tatiana – the crowd was pressed  
tight together as everyone pushed towards the exit –  
made his head swim,  
knees buckle  
and pulse race  
as though  
he were standing on the top of a high-dive board  
staring into the depths  
below.

'You go first, it'll be easier that way.'  
The turnstile must have had a sense of humour  
(or maybe it was just that their wool coats rubbed against  
each other)  
because it gave them an electric shock.

Tatiana stuck her ticket in an ikebana of trash,  
a foul efflorescence of ash,  
in one of those bins where smokers stub their cigarettes.

Outside, it was the usual tornado

between the four towers of the National Library.

In all kinds of weather,  
even in the middle of a hot August afternoon,  
while the whole city languishes, breathlessly,  
under a coal-black sun,

those library stairways are eternally swept by typhoons.  
Apparently it's an aerodynamic phenomenon  
related to the positioning  
of the towers.

A small architectural mistake.

And everyone complains about it, everyone bellyaches,  
but no one thinks of the joy  
of those four buildings  
playing ping-  
pong with the wind,  
lifting up skirts,  
artistically swirling the leaves and dirt.  
It's too bad  
how the happiness of some makes others sad.

Eugene and Tatiana walked through this whirlwind,  
and between them brief electrifying glances  
darted and fled,  
the way little crabs dart and flee

when children touch their fingers  
to a rock pool by the sea.

Their little dance of glances  
might have gone on like this forever,  
but someone got in the way.

He was a tall man,

handsome,

perhaps,

if your idea of beauty is the cold hard  
ice of marble, if your idea of beauty  
is the tough leather, scarred,  
of tree bark.

He was a powerful man,

sensual,

perhaps,

if sensuality for you  
is a craggy mountaintop  
in the wind-lashed dawn.

I believe it was Edmund Burke who used the word *sublime*

to describe that beauty, cracked and mineral,  
that wild beauty, rough and material,  
which not only attracts but terrifies.

'How glad I am to see you, Tatiana!

I'd wondered if our paths might cross today.'

declared this man, who was, it turned out,  
the supervisor of her thesis on Caillebotte.  
She hastened to introduce him to Eugene,  
who caught only brief snatches of their words,  
*Mr Leprince*  
*well-known specialist*  
*French Impressionism*  
preoccupied as he was by other things:  
*made notable discoveries*  
*about Renoir*  
Tatiana's pink, chapped lips, her dimpled chin,  
a few white cat hairs on her raspberry scarf,  
her posture, curved to the left  
*was the curator*  
*of the exhibition at the*  
*Musée du Luxembourg*  
by the weight of her bag,  
presumably stuffed with books and notes.  
'That's very interesting,' said Eugene,  
who really couldn't have cared less about Caillebotte  
or Renoir  
or Monet  
*and analysed*  
*Degas's correspondence*

or Degas.

Bloody Degas,  
with his stupid ballerinas.

But just to participate in the conversation, he said: 'Hey,  
that reminds me – it's been ages since I went to the Musée  
d'Orsay.'

It was then that Eugene noticed Tatiana's dark  
shining hair,  
blown by the wind  
into delicate arcs.

*And what, my dear,  
are your plans for the day?*

He also noticed that she had very pretty teeth,  
small, pearly, with nice little spaces –  
he hadn't realised that back then.

Hang on,  
didn't she used to wear braces  
before?

Before: ten years ago, she was . . . Hang on . . .

Fourteen!

Well yeah, there you go: fourteen.

At that age, you're still under construction.

*I'm going to reread Valéry  
as you suggested recently*

And now, it had all changed: her hair, her skin, her teeth.  
I remember how young she seemed,  
like a little kid.

*I didn't take enough notes before.  
And it's always useful to return  
to sources that you think you know.*

And I was practically an adult, thought Eugene.

And suddenly  
he remembered: fuck, I was seventeen. Seventeen!

Seventeen years old! Christ, that's beyond belief.  
Did it really exist, that age? Seventeen!  
It's impossible, seventeen. It's pure fiction.  
It's an age dreamed up to make old people believe  
that they used to be adolescents.  
Whereas in reality, it's absolutely certain  
that no one in the whole wide world  
was ever seventeen.

Eugene, however, was beginning to realise

*If you ever need to see me,  
just drop by*

that this thesis supervisor, sublime  
in the Burkean sense of the term,  
was, quite calmly and casually,

*your brilliant work  
is always a pleasure to read*

but very clearly, trying to pull Tatiana.

It was obvious that he, too, had seen  
the interlacing of her hair in the wind,  
her white teeth, those nice spaces in between,

*and I am of course eager  
to hear you speak  
at the museum  
next week*

and he suddenly wondered if there wasn't something  
going on between those two

that he should  
have been told about,

before remembering that, only this morning,  
as recently as quarter to nine,

he hadn't thought about Tatiana more than five or  
six times

in ten years.

He'd tried his best not to; whenever he'd got close,  
anywhere near,  
to thinking of her, by chance – of her, of that summer –  
he'd tiptoed back,  
clicked shut the door,

again and again,  
on that room in his mind where he'd stored  
that July, that August, those joys. That pain.  
So she'd been wiped from his memory for years,  
and now here he was, full of fears,  
like some jealous husband,  
a member of the Taliban,  
some big macho idiot: the kind of guy who appears on  
TV at one  
in the morning  
to explain why he can't stand the fact that his wife is  
a fan of Simon Le Bon.

And yet it was interesting for Eugene, who had hardly ever  
experienced this kind of feeling before,  
to sense the overwhelming power of his desire,  
when he looked at this man (sublime  
in the Burkean sense of the term),  
to murder him  
in a very aggressive way.

*by the by, I heard that a wonderful article you wrote  
is going to be published in Art History?*

Eugene was overcome by the urge to provoke him  
to a duel,

like they used to in the olden days.

If Lensky was here, he'd have been his second.

Shit, he hadn't thought about Lensky in years!

*I've really got to go, I've booked  
a desk in the library for half past nine.*

It was Tatiana who'd said those words.

*Until soon, maybe, Eugene . . .*

Tatiana was leaving. She'd booked  
a desk for half past nine.

*The library awaits!*

The library awaited.

*It was nice to see you again.*

*Really nice.*

It was nice. Really nice.

A kiss on the left cheek, a kiss on the right cheek.

The smell of cold,

cigarettes, bergamot.

*Time to get back to my Caillebotte.*

What a stupid name, Caillebotte. Really, it was the  
stupidest name ever.

He watched

with wonder

Tatiana

descend

the stairs  
in the gusts  
of the architectural blunder.

As Eugene was about to leave, feeling a bit flat,  
tired and sad,  
the sublime (in the Burkean sense of the term) man  
suddenly said  
in his guttural voice –  
the kind of voice you hear on posh radio stations  
like France Culture;  
a voice drowning in static; rough, gravelly,  
the kind you want to sweep like a driveway –  
he said in this voice to Eugene:  
'And how is it, sir, that you know Tatiana?  
I don't believe she has mentioned your name.'  
'I was friends with the boyfriend of her Olga sister,'  
replied Eugene, forcing himself to use the same  
rhythm, but getting his words mixed up.  
'I mean, her older sister. Olga,' he corrected.  
'Ah! A genuine, longstanding connection!  
Then I'm not telling you anything new if I say  
That she is the brightest student in my collection;  
From the indistinct mass of my PhDs,

She emerges, like a beam cast on the sea  
By a lighthouse, its dazzling reflection,  
Or the little firefly hovering softly  
In the dark night; incandescent perfection . . .'

'What the hell is he on about?' thought Eugene.

'This is a public declaration of love!

Live from the steps of the National Library!

He might just as well

yell

very very loudly through a megaphone:

*I love Tatiana! I love Tatiana! I love Tatiana!*

Is he mad or what? Why tell me that?

Oh, this is torture.'

And he stood still as stone,

stunned by the truth of this idea.

'The bastard.

He is torturing me.'

The man droned on in his voice from France Culture:

'I had forgotten all about the pleasures of the mind

And was calmly drifting to the end of my career

When Tatiana appeared and magically undermined

The daily trudge and drear . . .'

'Lensky was a poet,'

Eugene thought.

‘But not this kind of poet.  
Not like this pompous Leprince.  
Is he sleeping with her?’  
At nine thirty-five in the morning, logically,  
this question should not have entered his head.  
But now it was  
the most important question in the world.  
The key question.

‘Is he sleeping with her?’  
Eugene discovered that he had other questions too.  
Hundreds of thousands of questions,  
which he asked himself feverishly  
while Leprince did his worst,  
spouting declarations of love in rhyming verse.

She didn’t ask me what I did for a living – doesn’t she care  
is she still angry  
with me  
who could blame her after what I said  
is she sleeping with him  
how  
in whose bed  
what exactly did I tell her  
I can’t even remember now

*dear Tatiana*

no, not even a *dear* I don't think I even said *dear*

I was a little turd back then

I was hardly even me back then

has she thought about me recently

did she recognise me straight away

why has she changed like that

has she really changed

as much as all that

was she that pretty before

was she that witty before

was it the brace on her teeth that hid her soul from me

is thirty-five minutes enough time

to fall in love with a girl

or fall back in love

was I in love with her                      back then

did I have a personality                      back then

was I really a human being                      back then

was there anything inside my head

is he sleeping with her

is he sleeping with her?

I don't remember what I told her that day

if only I could remember

what the hell did I say?

then I could explain

perhaps she's waiting for me to apologise  
but I could hardly apologise to her just then  
down in the metro, on the fourteenth line,  
five minutes after seeing her again

am I getting myself worked up

over nothing very much  
did she already possess such beauty  
such intelligence such personality  
is she sleeping with him

would anyone notice if

I missed my grandfather's funeral?

yeah

probably

I think Mum would probably notice

particularly as I'm supposed to give a speech

damn

if I run

could I catch her  
is she already in the library  
is she waiting for me to call her  
is he sleeping with her  
is he sleeping with her?

These are just some  
of the thousands of questions  
that we will leave Eugene (for now) to wrestle  
with, alone.

Because it's time  
for a brief summary of the facts.  
It's time to go back  
about ten years

into the past,

back to when it all began.