

## The Construction Boys

*Breakfast* is one of my favourite words. It's a literal word, which is nice. You *break* your *fast*. From the night before. That's why I say it's got to be a proper meal. It's got to hold you over for a while. Out here people eat toast and butter and call that breakfast.

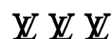
I'm on a side road just off the main street of this decent district. I've ordered an American style breakfast. Drip coffee and white sugar. The waitress is wearing a red plaid shirt and speaking in a girl-next-door Appalachian accent.

It's real metropolitan out today. Rain-clouds in the sky paint the grey stone grayer. At the corner of the street ahead of me stand 3 men. They're all wearing the same outfit. Short-sleeve black tees covered in paint and plaster stains. Baggy work pants with extra reinforcement stitched in at the knees. Muddy steel-toe boots. Like typical construction workers, but with a Louie V<sup>i</sup> satchel wrapped around their torsos. They must be a gang.

Maybe it's a political thing. Dressing up like that to represent the working man. It's symbolic of the struggle. The construction worker and the farmer are the two pillars of communism. The hammer and the sickle. Land-changers, infrastructure developers. On the sweat of their backs. Then why the Louie V satchel? It's out of place. Maybe it's a new kind of communism. Fashionable Marxists. Why not? I think it's a good idea. Economic equality for all doesn't have to mean drab style.

The Construction Boys all have vascular defined forearms. Probably from lifting bricks all day and spreading plaster. Tattoos too. One of them has a man bun. The other has a head buzzed like it's 1989 and we're in East Berlin. The third one has got a cap on low. He's the tallest.

The whole city is under construction. The major metros have got their transfers limited and the roads are lined by concrete barriers that section off renovations. *Travaux*<sup>ii</sup> is the word for it. In Spain they'd say *obras*. Maybe The Construction Boys have a hand in this? Are they off work, taking a break? I wonder if they go to bars when they're done their shifts and drink beers and watch the game. Something about that Louie satchel is throwing me off.



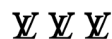
*Isn't everything political?* – my friend asks me. I don't know. I don't think so. He might have meant it rhetorically. I wonder if The Construction Boys are nationalistic. Could it be racial? Do they believe in something like a pure Francophonic race?

I took a plane into Paris. I sat beside an older French couple who had been in Spain on vacation. The wife smiled at me as she found her seat beside mine and put her hand luggage away in the overhead bin, and I pegged her right away for one of those sweet older ladies who loves to chat and keep things light. So soon after we took off I started to make some small conversation with her. I tried my hand first in Spanish. I had the dumb notion that the French might have an easier time with Spanish than English, which is not true. She didn't understand a word of it, and her English wasn't all there either. So I ended up using hand motions, asking her how to say simple things like up and down, left and right. *À droite et à gauche*<sup>iii</sup>. She would turn to her husband now and again, who spoke a little bit of English, and ask him for clarification. His response was always preceded by a good deal of unnecessary facial expressions in typical Parisian style, hunching up his lips and going *-ou, well, uhuh, je ne sais pas, ou, huh huh-* and so on.

We landed in Orly, which is an airport to the south of the city. We got our luggage and grabbed a taxi into the city together. I had a hard time remembering the wife's name. It started with *-Char-*, I was sure of that, but I didn't know if it was *Charlene* or *Charlot* or *Charlotta*. Luckily she handed me a small piece of paper during the ride that had both her name and her number written on it. She told me to save the piece of paper somewhere safe, and to text her if I ever had any problems. I thought that was very sweet. She asked me what my plans were. I told her I wanted to go to a couple cafés, specifically *Les Deux Magots* and *Café de Flore*<sup>iv</sup>, because I had heard that those guys like Picasso<sup>v</sup> and Camus<sup>vi</sup> went there in those days to drink and discuss ideas. The wife said they might text me the next day to join them for lunch. The couple got out in their neighbourhood which was nice and upper-class looking and paid for the taxi ride. I gave the wife 4 kisses on the cheek, 1 and 1 and 1 and 1, which she told me was normal in France, and said goodbye to her and her husband who scrunched up his lips and mumbled something very French sounding. They never ended up texting me. I must not have been *that* entertaining.

Now that I was alone with the taxi man I started talking to him. He looked and talked like your typical north African living in Europe. Which is to say skinny and suspiciously. The first thing he did when the older couple got out was to restart the meter. I asked him if we couldn't just go on from the last reading, and he gave me some bad reason as to why we couldn't. I didn't want to start a whole debate. I was lucky enough to have gotten the ride in with the older couple. Sometimes I'd rather just spend a bit more money than argue.

During the ride I saw a man sleeping on the sidewalk with his pants pulled down to his knees and his ass and his testicles showing. Across his ass cheeks were red and blue marks. It looked like he had been beaten.



They must get up early. The Construction Boys. To make the most of the day. The parables usually tell us that someone gets their blessing in the middle of work. That's when god goes down to them, to give them their duty.

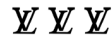
I'd like to join a group like that. A group of like-minded young males. Something to unite myself with, to claim some allegiance too. It's very romantic. Like the 3 musketeers.

Someone asked me to define postmodernism. I said it's someone who could get a job and a salary and a car and a mortgage and contribute to society by earning and spending money. But they don't want to. That's it. They haven't got any god or tradition impelling them to do so. They haven't got any reason to do any of it really, apart from the fact that it's what everyone else is doing. Consumerism and pollution, ordering small trinkets off of Amazon<sup>vii</sup>. I heard Keynes<sup>viii</sup> predicted we'd all be working 15-hour work weeks by now. Men and women are finding their place in the world today. Globalism has changed a lot of things.

As far as my understanding goes, it was a Canadian who really started talking about Globalism. Marshall McLuhan<sup>ix</sup>. The global village. I've been trying to find out what the whole yellow jacket movement<sup>x</sup> is about. Supposedly there's some new gas tax that's got the folks who live out in the country all riled up. That's their official claim, or so I've heard, but any Frenchman I talk to assures me that the real grief are the Muslims. The French can't abide them. Not one bit. I was in Paris on Saturday when the yellow jackets had their weekly rally. I didn't go to see it myself. I would have liked

to, despite Charlotta telling me to avoid it in case I got hit over the head with a baton. I don't know if she meant by the protestors or the police.

Cops over here are militant. No pudgy police officers with scruffy moustaches and pleasant smiles directing traffic. In Spain they're all young and tall and with great posture and an assault rifle hanging in front of their hips. Here in Paris they've got on butcher-style hats and body armour straight out of *Halo*<sup>xi</sup>. I saw one who had a row of plastic nylon straps hanging off a band from his back. It struck me that he must use them as handcuffs. With the armour on he was at least twice my size, with a neck as thick as a bulldog's and a head just as small. *I don't want any problems, officer.*



Paris lives and breathes and pulsates in the metro. It's the underground belly of the city. The speeding throbbing heart of the city. Where everything wells up, and you get a real sense of the people, of the attitude, of the mood that seethes in the soil. A massive worm that's tunneled its way underground like a second city. 12 lines crossing each other here and there, taking odd turns, ducking under the Seine<sup>xii</sup> from the right to the left bank. *À droite et à gauche.*

The *Art-Nouveau*<sup>xiii</sup> wrought-iron entrance gates that lead down to the crypt match the blend of sophistication and scum that is Paris. At one stop you might have at least 4 lines meeting, and you've got to trek through this stuffy white-walled maze littered with scores of bums and beggars, trying to make sense of the colours and signs that tell you to go this way and that.

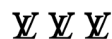
RATP<sup>xiv</sup> flies. TTC<sup>xv</sup> runs a snail-pace in comparison. The doors here open before the train even comes to a stop and people hop off onto the landing as the next group makes a mad dash on before it zips off again. In front of *Barbès-Rochechouart*<sup>xvi</sup>, where lives my friend, there's a score of north African's selling discount Marlboro<sup>xvii</sup> that they've brought over from Algeria.

My friend tells me that the metro conductors, the people whose job consists of pushing a button to make the trains stop and go, go on strike any time there's talk of putting in automated trains. And then the city can't move and everything comes to a halt and they get what they want. This is how France works, my friend tells me. The Metro Union and The Construction Boys. My friend complains about all the work going on in the city. He tells me the metro closures and *travaux* are a result of the mayor preparing the city for the Summer Olympics coming in 2024. The way he talks about it you'd think the mayor was doing all this just to torture the citizens.

In the metro I saw two workers putting up a propaganda for a new film. With mops from buckets. Like a temporary tattoo.

I saw a man lying down on the metro platform, his skin black from all the dirt on him. I went near him to get a whiff, but didn't smell anything.

I saw an Arab woman on the metro steps with a baby in her hand and gangrene on her foot.

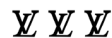


From the hill of *Sacré-Cœur*<sup>xviii</sup> you can get a good look out over Paris. Spanning out like a sea of 4-storied white-walled buildings with black wrought-iron balcony bars to the horizon. The uniformity makes all the churches pop. They've only got one skyscraper out here, sticking up like a big black thumb through the haze of uniformity, and my friend tells me the people voted it the second most hated

building in the world. I asked him what the first was and it's some town hall or other in Boston that looks like some architectural student's over-enthusiastic final project.

*Notre-Dame* burnt down. Coincidentally, I had been in Spain with my friend when it happened. He was distraught. But more than anything he was concerned that they'd discover who did it, if in fact it was done on purpose, and what would happen if it turned out to be a Muslim.

We visit *Café de Flor* but it's much too expensive and we decide to go to a place where we can buy three beers for the price of one. So we spend the afternoon at a bar by the river in a district called *Saint-Michel* looking at the scaffolding and cranes through the foliage and twin towers of the stone part of the cathedral. I was drinking shandys<sup>xix</sup>. In Spain they call them *claras*.



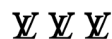
I go to the park with my friend and we watch people run. I do yoga on the grass and my friend asks me how I feel after having sex. Good, I tell him. He asks if I ever feel 'a little death'. I can't say that I have. I do feel a little tired though. Maybe this is what he means.

We go to his house and smoke some weed and talk about writing and philosophy. I had brought over a banana the day before and left it out on the coffee table. It was still there. I ate half and gave the other half to my friend. I love eating bananas after I smoke. I think the potassium eases out the high.

On the first Sunday of the month you can get into *Musée d'Orsay*<sup>xx</sup> for free. We go late in the day when it's about to close. I'm excited to see the orientalist<sup>xxi</sup> works. In one room they've got a few Van Gogh's hanging from the walls. I had never taken the time to appreciate Van Gogh<sup>xxii</sup> before. But he's got this one piece of a farmhouse just sitting out there in this field<sup>xxiii</sup>. It left a big impression on me. I recall my mother being amazed that someone could have had the ambition to create something as amazing as the *Sagrada Família*<sup>xxiv</sup>. Some art really deserves to be seen in person. My friend makes sure to get me a look at *L'Origine du Monde*<sup>xxv</sup> as the museum attendants are ushering us out. He tells me it caused quite the scandal in Paris at the time.

We go to a restaurant. We order the *plat du jour*<sup>xxvi</sup>. For the starter I get French onion soup. I say *bon appétit*<sup>xxvii</sup> like a good little tourist but my friend advises me against it. Supposedly, saying that in the company of the refined will mark you out as lower class. He tells me that if I ever start dating a girl from an upper-class French family that I'm to never say *bon appétit*. I'm still used to eating with my elbow on the table and pointing at things I find interesting. I heard that's considered rude too.

There's a neo-Nazi movement growing in Germany. The word Nazi comes from the German *nationalsozialismus*, which means national socialism. I asked my teacher to define nationalism. He said it's when people are proud of things they didn't do and hate people they don't know. I'm more concerned about the socialism.



When I come back to Canada I'm struck by how big everything is. Big cars, big houses, big lawns. Big meals too. Skyscrapers everywhere. Lots of space. Over there, everyone's always in your face. You've got to say *hi* when you enter a room and *bye* when you leave it.

Populism. This is a word that gets people talking nowadays. I'm not quite sure what it means, but I know I don't like it. Something about the masses against the elite. I had quite a few run-ins with

populists in Spain. They were usually mad at me for one reason or another. *You do what you want*, one told me, as though that were some sort of crime. It just seems like peer pressure to me.

There's a new right-wing party in Spain called *Vox*<sup>xxxviii</sup>. On the left they've got *Podemos*<sup>xxxix</sup>, run by a soybean type with a ponytail that the Spaniards refer to mockingly as *La Coleta*<sup>xxx</sup>. My teacher tells me that *Vox* has been throwing around words like *Frente Popular*<sup>xxxi</sup> in their speeches, which by the tone of his voice I figure I'm supposed to take as being ridiculous. I have no idea what any of it means, but I'm told its stuff from the era of Franco<sup>xxxii</sup>. That's something that'll serve you well to remember when you're in Spain. Not 50 years ago the people here were ruled by a dictator. There's still a strong current of it in the culture. The ID cards and the fingerprint machines. People tell me not to worry about that. I felt raped giving mine away.

Politics is always a fun party topic. It's something to flirt a bit with, but not get seriously interested in. I was at a pool party talking to an Italian friend. I tell him what I saw over there, and he tells me Italy's on the same track. Something about a party called *La Lega*<sup>xxxiii</sup>. I thought he was talking about soccer. *La Lega* and *MS5*, and some guy whose last name is Salvini<sup>xxxiv</sup> and who's now the president.

I see another friend and he tells me *MS5* stands for *Movimento Cinque Stelle*<sup>xxxv</sup>, a political party started by a comedian. They're all about the rights of the people. Italian rights. Italian people. I remember a story from last year about some ship full of refugees that Spain took in at Valencia. Supposedly, they had tried to go to Italy first and were denied. The people are fed up, it seems.

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Communism doesn't really fly over here in North America. I can't see The Construction Boys getting any footing. We've only got 2 parties to play with.

Toronto is plastered from head to toe in rainbow flags. It's a little bit too much if you ask me. Toronto is still a young city. Its identity is still forming. It's coming to a crossroads where it can become a fountain of culture or a giant billboard for political correctness. I really think the people have a responsibility to paint the walls themselves. If not, they'll have to accept whatever colour they're given. And you can tell when something's been discussed in a board meeting.

Foreigners don't respect our leader, Justin Trudeau<sup>xxxvi</sup>. I don't blame them. I'm glad I got to live through the reign of Rob Ford<sup>xxxvii</sup>, and now I see that his brother is premier of our province and that he's changing the slogan on the bottom of our license plates from *yours to discover* to *open for business*. It seems a little whorish to me.

The biggest threat to our way of life is China and their cameras. Facial-recognition technology. Social Credit Scores. A culture of informants. I heard Huawei<sup>xxxviii</sup> is collecting and sending information about their users to the Chinese government. I heard they're building infrastructure in Africa but enslaving the nations there with debt. Make sure you put a sticker over your laptop webcam.

North Korea is even worse. Imagine your shirt-tag said *made in North Korea*. I'd rather buy designer.

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- <sup>i</sup> *Louis Vuitton*. Designer luxury label from France, known for their valise's and distinctive monogram design
  - <sup>ii</sup> "Works"
  - <sup>iii</sup> "Left and right"
  - <sup>iv</sup> Two well-known cafés in Paris that are situated right next to each other in the 6<sup>th</sup> arrondissement
  - <sup>v</sup> Early 20<sup>th</sup> century artist born in Málaga, Spain. Known for his work in *cubism*
  - <sup>vi</sup> Algerian born French philosopher and writer. Author of *L'Étranger*
  - <sup>vii</sup> An on-line company that sells and ships products world-wide
  - <sup>viii</sup> John Maynard Keynes. Influential British economist from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century
  - <sup>ix</sup> Herbert Marshall McLuhan cc. 20<sup>th</sup> century Canadian philosopher
  - <sup>x</sup> A protest movement in France where participants don yellow safety vests like those commonly seen on construction sites. Clashes with the police are common, and rallies often turn violent
  - <sup>xi</sup> Futuristic first-person-shooter video game
  - <sup>xii</sup> River that runs through Paris
  - <sup>xiii</sup> A style of art and architecture popular from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries
  - <sup>xiv</sup> *Régie Autonome des Transports Parisien*. Public transport operating group of Paris
  - <sup>xv</sup> *Toronto Transit Committee*. Public transport agency of Toronto
  - <sup>xvi</sup> A metro station in Paris
  - <sup>xvii</sup> A brand of filter-tipped cigarettes with a distinctive red and white box
  - <sup>xviii</sup> A basilica in the Montmartre district of Paris
  - <sup>xix</sup> Beer mixed with lemonade
  - <sup>xx</sup> A museum in Paris on the left bank of the Seine. Converted into a museum from an old railway station
  - <sup>xxi</sup> Art style that depicts themes or settings from the near or far east, typically done by western artists
  - <sup>xxii</sup> Vincent Willem van Gogh. Dutch painter who lived from 1853 – 1890
  - <sup>xxiii</sup> *Chaumes de Cordeville à Auvers-sur-Oise (1890)*
  - <sup>xxiv</sup> Church in Barcelona designed by Antoni Gaudí. Still under construction
  - <sup>xxv</sup> Painting by Gustave Courbet (1866)
  - <sup>xxvi</sup> "Plate of the day"
  - <sup>xxvii</sup> "Good appetite"
  - <sup>xxviii</sup> Latin for "Voice"
  - <sup>xxix</sup> "We Can"
  - <sup>xxx</sup> "The Ponytail"
  - <sup>xxxi</sup> "Popular Front"
  - <sup>xxxii</sup> Francisco Franco. Dictator of Spain from 1939 - 1975
  - <sup>xxxiii</sup> "The League"
  - <sup>xxxiv</sup> Matteo Salvini. Deputy Prime Minister of Italy
  - <sup>xxxv</sup> "5 Star Movement"
  - <sup>xxxvi</sup> 23<sup>rd</sup> Prime Minister of Canada
  - <sup>xxxvii</sup> Mayor of Toronto from 2010 – 2014. Passed away in 2016
  - <sup>xxxviii</sup> Chinese smart phone company