

Mademoiselle Guignol

By Stephanie Shaw

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In Paris, in the eighteenth arrondissement, one can visit the Basilica de Sacré Coeur where it sits in neo-Byzantine splendor at the very top of the Montmartre. The dome gleams in the late afternoon sun. It is not made from Paris limestone, but from white rock quarried out of the Seine-et-Marne, in the North. The stone secretes calcite.

The Basilica will never stain or darken, but become whiter with age; a place of worship built to expiate the actions of the Communards, some of whom still lay rotting in the gypsum mines beneath Montmartre, paying for the sins of revolution.

It is 1913 and the church is as yet unconsecrated.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus, or a piece of it, rests in a crypt below. Along with the murdered Communards of 1871.

You have much in common with the Basilica de Sacré Coeur.

Chiefly, you are not Parisian. And in your old age you've grown pallid, bleached white as calcite. Even your gums have lost their color, although your teeth remain strong. There is no trace left of the blood that got you here, unless that's what stains your eyes.

Within the bleached skull of the Basilica, nuns whisper a ceaseless prayer of adoration.

As the sun sets and the sisters offer vespers, it is easy to leave this holy place: to leave God behind and make your stiff-kneed way down the long flight of steps. The dome of the Basilica eclipses the light at your back as you descend.

It is always easier to walk downhill.

You make a careful way along the steep, winding streets of Montmartre, surrounded by criminals and artists in equal measure, bathed in light and music and chatter and the scent of linseed oil as, having lost the sun, the artists roll up their canvases for another day.

Keep one hand on your wallet and one eye peeled for any new art movement. In the spring of 1913, Toulouse-Lautrec is dead. Archduke Franz Ferdinand's days are numbered. Picasso and Matisse are drinking and arguing at an outdoor café, to be joined by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. If you're feeling confident you might lean over as you pass to ask "Now really, which of you buggers was it that pinched the Mona Lisa from the Louvre?" then watch them erupt.

But don't. Keep walking. You have other artistic interests this night. While momentum still favors you, keep walking down that hill.

To the bottom.

To Pigalle.

Don't pause at the familiar red windmill of the Moulin Rouge. It is twenty years old and tarnished beyond repair by the constant attention of tourists. Toulouse Lautrec is dead and the Beautiful Age is soon to follow. A brutal time is about to take its place.

Pass the Boulevard De Clichy and continue south on the Rue Pigalle, leaving the lighted avenues behind. When you reach the Rue Chaptal, the steep streets become narrow and dark. Prostitutes perch in their doorways and windows, rouge and satin slips like bright streaks in a child's grubby painting. In other doorways, shabby men complete shadowy transactions. From hearsay you know there is an opium den somewhere nearby. A drunken couple weaves into a wall and takes that for a steady opportunity to copulate. Here men walk quickly, their heads down. Or they saunter and make a point of craning their necks to meet your eye, looking to sell or be sold, to foist or to take. You are glanced at, measured, left alone, for although you are old you do not look delicate and the hand in your pocket is your own.

Ignore the shortness of breath and the slamming of your heart against the crypt where you keep it, buried deep. Surely you are not so enfeebled that a short walk will be the death of you. Continue on with purpose. It has begun to rain.

Although you are dressed richly, you feel confident here. It reminds you of Whitechapel and home. But it is not the East End; you are not on Dorset Street. Do not give in to old man meanderings, to memories. Do not become lost. You tap your cane on dark cobbles in search of the Impasse Chaptal.

Ah.

Take a right into that short, blind alley.

You are greeted by a flat-faced building with squinting windows and neo-gothic touches, tucked into a fraying seam of La Belle Époque.

A door beckons.