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 IVF,
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.)

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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.