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## A Short Swim; Or, How an American Behaves in Northern France

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On Stormy Days  
-Ngoc Hoang  
College of Saint Benedict

### **A Short Swim; Or, How an American Behaves in Northern France**

No one in Calais liked my French, although they certainly did not dislike it either. Rather, they viewed my language with a sense of worry that they could not, for all their linguistic precision, quite put into words. Clearly, they appreciated that I spoke French; nearly everyone I encountered made a point of showing appreciation for my ability. Waiters, bus drivers, and receptionists all treated me with a peculiar respect when I addressed them fluently in their own language, but none matched the police. From the look of surprise and relief on the face of every officer I addressed, I inferred that the police force in Calais had a great deal of experience with non-French speaking foreigners. This did not mean, however, that I was particularly beloved in Calais. Calais is not Paris, and the residents there are not used to having foreigners stay in their city for prolonged periods of time, and thus viewed my continued presence as a sort of nervous oddity, a thing to endure for what would hopefully be only a short while.

But while the residents of Calais may have been a bit mystified or perhaps irritated by the fact that an American had lingered so long in their city, this was not the real issue. My greatest offense was speaking their language. Infested with tourists who spoke little or no French, Calaisiens spent what seemed like a great deal of their leisure time playing games with unwitting Anglophones. I often witnessed one called “les mots faux.” The game was simple—a group of Calaisiens, usually young males, would approach a group of tourists and ask, politely, if they needed any help finding their way around the city. The tourists almost invariably did, and they would do their best to respond in French. No matter their response, the boys would “correct” their French, unwittingly filling the tourists’ vocabulary with obscenities

and sexual puns, that they knew would eventually be repeated elsewhere. They took great pleasure in this convolution of foreigners' French.

This was not possible with me. My experience with native Francophones made me relatively impervious to their word-play. Naturally, this bothered them greatly. I was very much an American, and yet I had managed to penetrate their complex, idiomatic language, which served as their last, best defense against an invading army of foreigners. In response, they relegated me to the position of transient Frenchman—I was privy to their meals, their culture, even their personal conversations, but all on the silent condition that I would, after a short while, be on my way.

I certainly did nothing to reassure uneasy Calaisiens when, three weeks after my arrival, I decided to become a criminal. Of course, I didn't see it that way at first. I was simply "exploring." During my stay I had managed to resist things I thought of as "tourism," in hopes that I would avoid the stigma attached to the crowds gathered around the massive, Renaissance-style Town Hall, or those who paused to murmur pseudo-intellectual comments before Rodin's *Les Bourgeois de Calais*, which stands in the town square. One aspect of the city was, however, irresistible to me—le phare, the lighthouse. Calais is a town built entirely on shipping, with a series of large, congested docks along the coastline, an area nearly entirely disregarded by foreigners. Just past them is an old lighthouse—small as lighthouses go—and in a state of disrepair. It is a workmen's lighthouse, not intended to be climbed on family vacations or plastered onto the front of postcards. Although it requires a bit of trespassing, it is possible for one to swim out to it, and even to climb a little ways up its side, where a small ledge provides a seat from which, a polite French waiter had told me, one might glimpse the white cliffs of Dover without so much as a pair of binoculars. This, I reasoned, could not be tourism. Anything that required the climbing of a fence and swimming through one of France's busiest ports would not be found in a travel guide or hotel brochure.

Getting to the lighthouse required me to walk along a rather long stretch of dock. I marched past an endless line of ships, first the oldest, the hulls of which bore the rust of years of oceanic travels, and eventually the newest, which gleamed in a bright mid-day sun. The two classes were separated by a series of thick ropes, which alternated from red and blue to red and white. I had not walked long before I noticed the stares. The towering ships created a gallery of sorts, down from which the sailors peered at an obvious foreigner who, to the best of his ability, was casually strolling through their workplace. Clearly, I was dressed wrong—corduroys and a sweater were not the uniform of the Calaisien dock-worker, and despite what their advertising campaigns may wish to portray, Sperrys were not the shoe of choice among any of the sailors. A few yelled things in Spanish and Portuguese, and I wondered if I should call back in French, or perhaps even in English. Eventually, one of the workers on the ground called to me directly, speaking in familiar Northern French.

"T'es perdu? Je te montrerai le C-V"

"Non, Non" I responded. "Pas perdu. J'fais une promenade."

He looked puzzled. "Sur les docks?"

"Oui, sur les docks. Au phare."

He laughed at this. "Le phare est là" he said nicely, gesturing towards the "other" lighthouse, a large brick skyscraper that dominated the skyline and served as one of Calais' most popular tourist attractions. "Tu dois le visiter avant tu quittes Calais."

I smiled back at him. "Non, non, une autre" I began to say, but paused and instead mur-

mured “Ouai, merci” and continued down the docks.

The lighthouse, once I finally reached sight of it, was farther out to sea than I had imagined. Not being a particularly strong swimmer, and fully aware that the water would be rather frigid, I hesitated for a few moments on the edge of the rocky coast at the end of the docks that served as a makeshift beach. I do not, even now, remember getting in the water; my only recollections are the cold, and the fact that the water seemed sharp, different from swimming in the Mediterranean in the South or even the Bay of Biscay in the Southwest. The water, it seemed, was unaccustomed to my presence.

I had left my pants on (figuring, naturally, that one cannot very well explore a lighthouse without trousers), and by the time I managed to drag myself onto the island’s craggy shore they were filled with water, which required me to remove them and wring them out on land. I do not know if anyone saw me, nor what their reaction would have been to the sight of a young man, clearly a stranger, standing in his underwear a few hundred feet out from shore. I do know, however, that it was at that moment that I felt irrevocably alien to that place, a feeling that was at once both oddly comedic and unflinchingly somber.

My pants sufficiently dry, I turned towards my next obstacle—the fence. It wasn’t a terribly high fence, but since I lacked shoes and was yet to catch my breath following the swim, climbing it was a formidable task, and by the time I had reached the other side my feet were scraped and I was a bit dizzy from being winded for so long. At the base of the lighthouse, I took a few deep breaths to clear my head, and then began the climb up a series of rusted metal rings hanging precariously off the side. The rings groaned beneath my weight, but held nonetheless, until I finally reached my summit—the three by three ledge just underneath the lighthouse’s uppermost window. I regret not planting an American flag.

What the waiter had told me about the cliffs of Dover was true; they were beautiful, even without binoculars. The ivory ridge seemed to exist on its own, a single chalky bastion of the English language, visible, but much too far to swim to. I was contemplating taking the ferry across la manche to visit the cliffs for a while when I heard a female voice from the docks:

“Monsieur” and then again louder, “Monsieur! C’est interdit d’aller à l’île. Vous devez revenir, maintenant.”

I turned to see a younger woman, no older than 30, in a uniform I did not recognize. It was not the uniform of the Calasien police, but she wore a badge and utility belt in the manner of someone with authority. Despite it being the early afternoon, she shined her flashlight towards me as she spoke.

“Monsieur, vous savez pas si l’île est interdit? Il y a une clôture.”

For a few seconds I stared at her blankly, wondering if this woman had any prior experience apprehending damp, shoeless Americans for trespassing in old lighthouses. My first words surely did not ease her confusion:

“Mes chaussures—là, sur les rochers” She walked over to my shoes and examined them, as if she had encountered them at Printemps.

“Je les aime” she said, “Quelle marque sont-ils?”

“Ils s’appellent Sperrys” I responded. “Chaussures pour les bateaux.”

While she examined my shoes, I made the cold swim back to shore. This time I elected not to wring the water from my pants. She returned my shoes to me and walked me back to the edge of the docks. The dockworkers had gone home, and the sailors no longer leered at

me from above, and I found the docks a much more peaceful place than before. As we walked we spoke French, and a little broken English, until we reached the town square, and turned in opposite directions. She waved and smiled, and I assumed that this was not the French manner of putting someone under arrest, so I continued back to the one-room apartment above a small restaurant that I called home. Walking in, I noticed a sign in the lobby:

“Ce Soir: Huîtres au Buerre”

“Dis,” I said to the young girl working the counter, “Ce sont bonne, n’est-ce pas?”

“Yes,” she surprised me with her English, “You must try some before you leave.”

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Paris, France  
-Melissa Bradley  
College of Saint Benedict