



SARTRE-ORIAL

Jane Cornwell recalls a brief encounter with a well-dressed philosopher on the streets of Paris

Christophe liked to meet me on the Pont des Arts, the footbridge over the Seine that links the Left Bank with the Louvre. He'd arrive early, sit on the middle bench and take in the view: Pont Neuf, the oldest bridge in Paris; Ile de la Cite, the tiny island with the copse of green trees and the hulking Notre Dame cathedral.

He never replied to texts telling him what time my Eurostar arrived. But there he'd be, on the bridge.

I'd see him before he saw me. I'd come out of the Metro at Louvre-Rivoli, taking a detour past the great glass pyramids in the museum courtyard, spotting him before I'd even crossed the road.

Something always gave him away: a red fedora, a polka dot bow tie, a shock of silk erupting from a bespoke breast pocket.

One time he was wearing a buttercup yellow suit and owlsh glasses with lime green rims. He was resting a hand on the brass knob of a walking cane, and chomping on a pipe whose carved duck's head sported a little orange beak.

The pipe wasn't lit. Christophe didn't smoke.

"People respect you if you dress well," he said after we'd started chatting at the New Morning, a jazz club in the 10th arrondissement where I'd gone to review a Congolese band that played traditional tribal trance music on thumb pianos amplified with old car alternator magnets. The band, whose name was Konono No 1, had just been signed to a hip Belgian record label; the music press in Britain and Europe was calling them the next big thing.

Christophe thought this was very funny since Konono No 1 was an institution in Kinshasa and had been playing there for decades.

"Young people in the Congo don't listen to Konono any more." He pulled at his cufflinks. "They like soukous and rap."

Christophe was tall, around 30, and so slim that I reckoned I could fit both of my hands around his waist if I squeezed him hard enough. He had high cheekbones, a wide nose and a pencil moustache like the circumflex on my keyboard. Even with the sweat patches under his arms — it was summer, and the place was rammed — he looked like he was someone.

I checked out his clothes: turquoise trousers, a shirt with fat purple stripes, a violet waistcoat with a mustard pocket silk and a fob watch on a looping silver chain: "Clothes make the man," he'd said in his heavy French-African accent, putting one polished brogue in front of the other and spiralling his hand. There wasn't enough room for him to bow. I was glad that I'd

frocked up before I left my hotel in Saint-Sulpice, even if it was only in the olive green Ghost dress I wore in Santiago the summer before, and a pair of peach fabric mules from a second-hand designer shop in Islington that I rarely wore since they were always slipping off.

The upbeat vibe in the New Morning got strangers talking, in between watching various band members blowing whistles, beating drums, ping-pong the metal rods of their little boxy thumb pianos. The music was warping through a pair of old porte-voix speakers that looked like white lilies on stilts; whenever the sound built and broke, people put their arms in the air and whooped, like I used to do back in the day, in Heaven.

I took out my notepad and made some notes. Christophe looked over my shoulder.

"Music is where the passions enjoy themselves." A pause. "Nietzsche."

I wrote that down too.

Several African men were working the same dandified look as Christophe, channelling the salons of 1920s Paris by way of Charles Baudelaire and Willy Wonka. A short guy in a Jeeves-esque white bowler hat fingered the lapel of his royal blue frockcoat as he pushed past on his way to the bar.

Christophe stared at the guy's white leather sneakers, which had perforated fronts and a signature striped trim.

"Paul Smith," he said. "Tres bon."

They were sapeurs: the society of Congolese men who were obsessed with European designer clothes. Les Sapes, as they were also known, pursued a lifestyle that celebrated elegance, style and impeccable manners, sticking two fingers up to war, poverty and the late leopard-hat-wearing dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who'd banned Christmas and the wearing of bow ties.

Most sapeurs loved French and Italian labels: Gaultier, Versace, Yves Saint Laurent. But Christophe had a thing for English pieces, especially Paul Smith's classics with a twist.

Later he would tell me that he'd read up on English style in old copies of the Paris-based magazine *Africa Elite*, the unofficial bible of his sapeur group in Kinshasa. They'd met each week in a tin-shed pool hall on a dirt road next to an open sewer, to swap tips like getting the dimple in a cravat just right.

Christophe hadn't been to England. He'd been in Paris for over a decade.

"What do you do?" I said.

"What do any of us do?" His smile delivered the question. Philosophy was another of his pursuits.

After the gig finished Christophe suggested

we go for a drink in Saint-Germain-des-Pres, which was a good idea since it was close to my hotel.

I liked him. I wanted to know his story. We set off for the Metro, Christophe walking on the side of the footpath nearest to the road, my toes gripping the soles of my mules.

He let me go ahead down the stairs and through the station doors with the big green handprints on them, which he activated for me. When I put my ticket in the turnstiles he bunched in close and we tripped through together.

"Ooh la la," I said as I fell out of a mule. "Is that a fob watch in your poche?"

The train was crowded so we stood near the door, hanging on to the silver pole, our knuckles bumping. An older woman with a French bulldog on her lap was staring hard at Christophe and me; as we got out I squished my tongue into my bottom lip at her.

The Left Bank was used to flamboyance, but it was past midnight: most places were shut.

"De Beauvoir and Sartre used to sit in there," I said as we passed Cafe Les Deux Magots, with its outdoor tables under a pea-green awning.

"Man is what he wills himself to be," said Christophe. "Sartre."

We found a late-night supermarket on Rue de Seine, one with mirrored walls by its check-out, and Christophe gave himself the once-over in them while I bought us a cut-price

bottle of fizz and a sealed tower of plastic cups.

"Champagne!" I said. "Tonight, mon ami, we are existentialistes."

"Merci beaucoup." He put his arm out and we flaneur-ed along until we hit the river and the Pont des Arts.

It was a hot night, so all the benches on the bridge were taken. I ripped some pages out of my notepad and we laid them on the decking next to the railing and sat down; Christophe popped open the champagne with his thumb and the cork arced into the water, where it bobbed as it drifted away.

"To visit Paris is the dream of all sapeurs in the Congo," he said as a barge chugged underneath us.

I remembered a photo of my mother standing in front of the Eiffel Tower, her hair teased into the beehive she said would flip up like a lid in a high wind, wearing the black jeans she'd bought in Montmartre, and reckoned she was the first woman in Australia to wear. Right from when I was a kid, reading books under the blanket with a torch, visiting Paris had been my dream, too.

I raised my cup to the City of Light: to chansons and accordions; bicycles and baguettes; to Amelie, Breton tops and Gerard Depardieu. A blast of Piaf singing "Non, je ne regrette rien" roared in my head. Too right, I thought.

Christophe raised his cup to somewhere more specific: "To Chateau Rouge."

Chateau Rouge was one of Paris's more African neighbourhoods. It had an open-air market in Rue Dejean that heaved with everything from egg whisks and knock-off cigarettes to fruit and veg at €1 per kilo.

Its shops sold fabrics, cosmetics and mobile phones, and CDs by musicians who were mega in Benin and Burkina Faso and ignored by white world music pundits.

"There is more than one Paris," said Christophe, sipping his champagne.

"To Paris," I said. "Cheers! Sante!"

"Sante!" he said. "To La Sante!"

"Hooray!" I was confused.

Afterwards he walked me back to my hotel, a traditional townhouse tucked opposite the soaring east wall of Saint-Sulpice church, and we stood in the shadows looking up at the dark hotel windows with their wrought-iron balconies and geranium pots.

"Kiss me," he said.

Bong, went the church bells as our tongues met. Bong, they went as his fob watch dug into my ribs. Bong, as he stepped back and I toppled forward, falling out of a mule and stepping bare-foot onto a cobble.

"Now I will let you sleep," he said.

"Oh," I said. "But I am not in the least bit fatigued."

"Let me know when you are coming again." He was waiting for me to get inside. "I will be there on the bridge."

When I got back to London I texted "great to meet you" but he didn't reply.

Extracted from *The Whirl: Men, Music & Misadventures*, by Jane Cornwell (HarperCollins, \$29.99).

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