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I Was Just Thinking...

I discovered America in Paris.

I learned the pledge of allegiance in a small Midwest grade school. For years one of the biggest events in our town was the Fourth of July fireworks display on the bluffs overlooking the river.

Until a late Summer evening in the Place de la Concorde, I thought I knew what pride of birthright meant.

A crowd had begun to gather around the slender shaft of the obelisk. But there are always crowds in Paris, often a holiday air. Then suddenly the blackness of the distant Eiffel Tower was a blaze of light. The Arc de Triomphe answered in a splendor of red, white, and blue.

And from the throat of the people came a great voice of joy.

The stranger beside me saw my bewilderment.

"Don't you know? This is the anniversary of the day your Americans liberated Paris."

Around us heads turned and the eyes I had thought calculating and the faces I had thought disdainful were kind and gentle. We had been alien. This August night made us friends.

This was for me, an American, and this tribute for all Americans from a people who could not forget.

The crowd swept me across the city and I thought it must surely have been a little the same the day the tanks came and the trucks and the dusty khaki. But then these faces beside me were thin and pale, though no less transfigured.

Beyond the marble of the Palais du Chaillot were the formal gardens and beyond the Seine the tower. Above them both, the night was alight with rocket bursts in the colors two nations share.

The thin melody of a single violin rose over the noise and the night. It was held in the hands of the old man on the marble steps. His face, too, was raised to the sky and his eyes reflected the light.

He played the Marseillaise and somehow it sounded like the Star Spangled Banner. It was a night that there was little difference.

It was almost midnight before the light and the music died and the crowd melted into the shadows. In the cab on the way back to my little hotel, I found myself trembling with the damp chill of an early Autumn. And something more.

My Midwest school planted national pride in me with its history books. I was taught respect for my flag and my country. I honor both on the Fourth of July.

But I became a patriot in Paris.

Patty Johnson