



© Katie Sticklor

Failing to Find Seurat

Jessica Stilling

He wasn't at the cemetery, not where they said he'd be. Not in the right section, block or plot number.

Though maybe Lucy had just been looking in the wrong place. 'And that map,' she complained, arm in arm with Julien, 'it just wasn't fair, I couldn't see a thing. We found Oscar Wilde and Jim Morrison, but no one else, no Seurat.'

'I couldn't see him either,' Julien joked and Lucy wondered if she should laugh. Was it really very funny? He couldn't see anything, a blind man? Should you laugh when a blind man complains that he can't see?

She'd just met Julien a couple of days before at a café in the Latin Quarter of Paris and now she was walking with this man, very attractive, long hair, hard body, a ballet dancer. Except he was blind. And what would her family think, her friends back home in Connecticut, her running around Paris with a . . . how many adjectives was it again? A French, blind, ballet dancer. A *male* ballet dancer, that was very important, if she told her friends she was hanging around with a blind ballet dancer they'd picture a woman, lithe and thin, stringy hair always pulled back, but that would have missed the point completely.

They walked further down the island just outside of Paris, which sat past the Arc de Triomphe and through the Bois de Boulogne, at La Grande Jatte, where Seurat had painted his masterpiece, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte*. Everything, Lucy knew, sounded so much better in French. It wasn't the same, the island, not at all, not like the painting. Lucy had thought that impressionism might have been enough to preserve the grounds of *Sunday Afternoon . . . , un dimanche . . .*, but there were houses, normal, everyday houses, and wrought iron streetlights, sidewalks and wooded walkways. A concrete wall near the bridge they were seated by was littered with red and yellow and green and purple and blue and pink graffiti. Words, it was just words, stringy and hollow on cold stone.

They'd been searching for Seurat for a while. Lucy would have taken him in any shape, any form; gravestone or real life panoramic view of his masterpiece. He was Lucy's favourite

painter. Lucy's favourite painter when she wasn't obsessed with Michelangelo or Picasso, when she wasn't in Italy or Spain. Lucy had enough of an artistic inclination to go wandering off during her vacation to search for a painting she'd once seen at The Art Institute in Chicago and fallen in love with, though she was not what one would call an artist. She might end up an art historian, but Lucy had learned, when it came to her own talents, not to kid herself.

'Maybe it's not here anymore. You said it was a beach scene, a bunch of nineteenth-century Parisians dressed to the nines lying out on the grass. Maybe there isn't any grass anymore, you said this place had gotten built up,' Julien offered as Lucy walked arm in arm with him like they'd fallen right back into the nineteenth century, only their roles were reversed and she was guiding him.

'But why would they do that?' Lucy asked, exacerbated, though she had to admit the island had changed considerably. It was like the suburbs, mid-sized aluminum siding houses covered the island in the Seine just outside of Paris; there'd been a park with a tennis court and a market a few blocks back. They were now walking on a section of sidewalk lined with grass and trees, but it wasn't a very large section, it didn't reach the water. 'Let's sit down,' Lucy offered, gently pulling Julien's arm so that he shuffled his legs and moved to take a seat. It was all very coordinated, 'here you sit here, go down like that, there we go,' and Lucy wondered if this man had just gotten used to being helped like that all the time by everyone. In a way it had to be infuriating.

'Everything is all right,' Julien replied, carefully, but coordinately, draping an arm around Lucy. 'We'll find Seurat, he can't hide forever, and when we catch him, maybe he'll paint us another picture.'

'What are pictures to you?' she asked him.

'They are things people tell me about. But sometimes they can be very specific.'

Jean Bonaparte, not so aptly named considering his dislike for monarchies, walked slowly down the street in La Grande Jatte. He lived in Saint-Ouen, a town just outside of Paris, in an apartment with two friends and a dog they called Chuckles. One of his friends was American and had insisted on it. After moving

with his family from Haiti to Paris when he was fourteen years old, Jean Bonaparte had learned perfect French, French French, not that watered down ruff raff they spoke on the islands. That French had gotten his head kicked in on his first day of school here, when the white boys heard him speaking. They didn't mind his race, in the grand scheme of things they didn't at all, considering what everyone back home had said about the Europeans and race, the Americans and race, but they had minded that he couldn't speak French right. And so he'd learned. Jean Bonaparte had never been one to give up, he'd never been one to say 'screw everyone'. And so he learned proper French, got a university degree and still ended up poor and working as a Pre-School teacher for a rich bilingual school (English and French) on this island that was only meant for tourists and families who did not want to raise their children within the city limits, though you could still see the Eiffel Tower from this place if you craned your head the right way.

Jean Bonaparte, they said he got his surname when his great great great great grandmother slept with one of Neapolitan's offspring on a trip to the islands. After this elusive Bonaparte left, the story goes, she decided to take his name, insisting on it until it was put into the record books. No one ever knew if a child had come from that union, or if that union happened at all, but his name was Bonaparte, it had been for many generations.

Jean was taking a group of fourteen four-year-olds to the park on the other side of the island. They were walking very slowly, as with four-year-olds you do everything slowly; stopping every few minutes, because with four-year-olds you stop all the time — but they were moving fast enough, that's all that mattered. Camille, Jean's teaching partner, was supposed to accompany him on this out of school expedition today, but she'd called in sick, something about a sore throat, though Jean knew she'd been out late last night partying. He'd told his supervisor he didn't think he could handle fourteen children on his own, but she'd only shrugged and told him to go.

'Jean, Jean, Monsieur Jean,' one of the children asked, pulling on his sleeve. 'Are we there yet? My feet are tired.' It was a little girl, her name was Sarah. She had long blond hair and a cowlick on her left side, something that might make her self-conscious when she got older.

'Just a little further,' Jean said patiently. 'It's not that far, I promise and then we'll be at the park.'

'But I'm tired,' she whined and a few more whines came from behind her. They were always tired when they had to walk, but he knew once they got to the park their energy would miraculously return. He watched them march by him, one, two, three, four . . . all the way to fourteen little children in brightly coloured T-shirts, the sort-of uniform for the school.

Rodolphe walked quickly, as if it mattered. No one was going to catch him and Bruno skipping school, not this far away from the grounds. And what could they do, haul them back in? This wasn't the 1800s, the police had better things to do than haul teenagers in for nothing at all, for truancy, and France was a civilised nation now. They were on the bridge that connected the mainland to the island of La Grande Jatte, a cute little suburb of Paris where a bunch of rich people lived. The bridge was clunky, a deep, dark metal with graffiti on its edges that

swayed in the breeze. It wasn't that unsteady, Rodolphe knew that, but he wanted to get across it as quickly as possible. The Seine sat underneath them, long and brown, wide and mucky, he'd never understood what all the fuss was about. Bruno looked over the edge, half his body off the bridge, and Rodolphe had to close his eyes to keep from grabbing his friend and holding him back from the edge like a sissy.

'You know, Rodo, I could jump, I should jump,' Bruno warned, head still stuck over the edge. 'That would serve my parents right. What right do they have, kicking me out, sending me to live in that godforsaken Forbach?'

'That's right,' Rodo concurred; he agreed with everything his friend said.

'For what, so I won't be graduating this year? Big deal, that means I won't have to go out there and find a job, there aren't any jobs anyway. What do they care?'

'Maybe that's why they're sending you to Forbach,' Rodo offered.

'I don't buy it. They want me out of their hair so they can screw on the kitchen table without having to worry about whether or not I come home.'

Rodo laughed. 'Really, you think they screw on the table? My parents haven't done it since my brother was born, I swear. That's sick.'

'Look,' Bruno pointed down, his shaggy light brown hair falling into his face as he pointed to the graphitised steps leading down to the island. Paris was a funny place and Rodo didn't know how such a rich island could stand for graphitised steps down to it. 'Look, you see down there, those children, look at all those colours.' Bruno kept pointing down, where a group of children were walking hand in hand, each in a brightly coloured T-shirt as if it were their uniform to go about dancing like little rainbows, red and green and purple and yellow and blue and pink. All those colours like they were little cut outs of construction paper on an elementary school desk.

'Looks like someone's on a field trip today,' Rodo added and Bruno walked ahead of him, in a sudden rush. As if they had anything to do today. School wasn't letting out for another three hours.

'I just don't get it,' Lucy said in reference to the island.

'I do not get it either,' Julien replied, arm still wrapped around her shoulders. 'I have lived in Paris my whole life and still no one has ever asked me before to see . . . to see Seurat.'

'He's not here,' Lucy half pouted, though she wasn't really all that upset. She liked Picasso better when you really twisted her arm.

'So what is it about Impressionism?' Julien asked innocently. 'I've never seen it, I don't know.'

'It looks like life, that's what I can say about it, all smudges and screwed faces. Before that people had been painting canvases to mirror reality, and then there was photography, but Impressionism mirrors life, not reality, life.'

They were almost to the end of the island, they'd scoured the thing, or she'd scoured the thing, walking back and forth and now up and down and still nothing. La Grande Jatte, and she was sure she was in the right place, was all bright white sidewalks and suburban-esque homes, tennis courts and tree-lined avenues. There were no open spaces for people to sit on the grass and watch the Seine go by, no little dots of colour,

one here and one there, mingling so that red and blue made purple and yellow and blue made green, but there is no green, no purple, not really, it's only when you put them together, only when everything connects that it all makes sense.

'So what about your dancing?' Lucy asked as a biker went by, zipping down the sidewalk and turning at the bridge back over to mainland France.

'I started when I was a boy. Very young. I don't know, when I heard the music, even when I was little, it was like I could see. No one needed to help me move, it was all the music, only the music and so whenever I was not somewhere I had to be, school, at Sunday dinner, I danced. And one day I decided I might as well spend the rest of my life dancing and there you go. Now I study dance and they are . . . very . . . proud at my school, and everyone is throwing money at me to keep dancing and so I do. Their little parlour trick, the blind ballet dancer.'

'But you'd do it anyway, right, if they didn't pay you?' Lucy asked, not wanting to feel jaded around this man.

'But of course,' Julien replied. He fumbled for a second and stood full at attention, gracefully reaching an arm down he helped Lucy to her feet. 'Hum something,' he offered merrily and Lucy laughed.

'Hum what, what are we doing?' she asked and at that Julien twirled her around and she landed back in his arms.

'Fine, fine, I will hum something.' And off he went, humming something, anything, Lucy couldn't pin it down, as he danced for her, through and around her nimble limbs, muscles moving through his jeans and white T-shirt and he was right. He was very right. It was as if he could see.

And they moved through them, all different colours, shapes, sizes, a horde of children in T-shirts, red and blue and green and purple and yellow and pink. A rainbow of them, a myriad floating as if through the air, on the sidewalk, as Julien kept dancing around her. A little girl stopped and stared at him and Lucy smiled at her. She waved back before running towards the bridge. It was all that colour, they came out of nowhere and it was like a ballet.

'Here, here, wait guys, you have to stop and wait,' Jean Bonaparte called to the kids running endlessly past the trees, over the sidewalk and towards the bridge leading off the island and onto a very busy street. 'We have to stay here, don't go up those stairs.'

'Fine,' Jacques, a boy with short black hair, called, turning back. The other children fell in line behind him and Jean had a chance to catch up. He nearly knocked into a group of dancing lovers, a couple of people who looked like tourists, as he rushed to keep up with the kids.

'We're going straight, you remember, the park by the bridge, not the park over the bridge,' Jean called, smiling sheepishly at the young couple as the man stood still now, looking a little more feeble than he had before and the woman placed an arm around him, helping him to sit.

It was his cousin that was bothering him. It wasn't even the kids, the way they ran and didn't listen, the fact that Camille had backed out on him. That wasn't really a problem. His mother wanted Jean to let his cousin Carl from Haiti move in with him. As if he didn't have enough roommates. It was like the third world there and wasn't that why his family had left the island and moved here, to get away from all that? And

what was Carl's problem; wanting to live with a cousin he hadn't seen since he was seven? A cousin he'd tried to beat up back then.

'Hi!' Lilly, a little Chinese girl with short hair and a missing tooth, called. She stood right in front of him, so close he could have knocked her over or tripped on her feet. 'Hi, how are you? Are we going to the park soon?' she asked and at that, before Jean could get a word in edgewise, a cry came from the bridge and then a scream.

'I told you not to go up there!' a boy called and it was Jacques. He could be overzealous and Jean was sure he'd make a nice hall monitor someday. Little Adeline in her pink T-shirt was crying because little Jacques in his blue T-shirt had pushed her off the first stair of the bridge. She stood with her hands out, offering her palms to Jean like a Christ figure. Jean knelt sympathetically in front of the girl and looked at her hands. They were fine, a little dirty, but fine.

'You'll be okay,' Jean started, kissing one palm and then the other as the girl laughed. 'You're tougher than that aren't you?' The girl laughed some more and Jacques jumped from the first step up from the bridge. 'And you, you'll stay with me the rest of the day. You won't be playing at the park with the others.'

'No fair!' Jacques called and Bradley, in yellow, laughed, pointing a finger at him.

'And if you start laughing at him you'll be next,' Jean warned Bradley as he prepared to move on.

'One, two, three, four,' Bruno counted each step as they descended to the island from the bridge. The steps were rickety, metal crudely put together like out of a children's play set. Rodo thought about telling his friend to shut up or starting up on another topic of conversation, but he didn't have much to say.

'And really how dare they,' Bruno interrupted his own counting at the tenth stair. 'Telling me to move in with my grandparents, making me go to Forbach, really godforsaken Forbach of all places, might as well exile me to the third world. I hate my life.'

'Maybe if you get a job, show your parents that you care, that you want to do better?' Rodo asked as they neared the last step before the island.

'You know that won't work,' Bruno went on, shaking his head as he reached the final stair and they were smack dab in the midst of a throng of small children. Very small children, all of them in their own brightly coloured T-shirt. They ran around them, nearly moving through Bruno and Rodo so that Rodo thought he might just have to do the splits to get out of this.

'Watch out,' Rodo finally called when a little boy ran right in front of him. The kid stepped on his foot and Rodo pushed him to the ground. The kid hit the concrete with his hands out, crying and snivelling the moment he touched down.

'Hey!' someone called from behind him and Rodo saw a large black man rushing at him. He had to move through the children, all of whom wanted to cling to him, but he made it to Bruno and Rodo before they could sprint back up the stairs and off this island. 'What's wrong with you, pushing a kid like that? He could get hurt. He doesn't know any better.' He had an island accent, something smooth and affected, definitely not French.

'Whatever,' was all Rodo could say.

‘And by the way, shouldn’t you be in school? Aren’t these school hours? You’re not eighteen, I can tell.’

‘None of your business,’ Rodo yelled back, looking to his friend, who offered no help. ‘Why don’t you go back to the islands where you belong? We don’t want you here, polluting our water, wasting our jobs. Who the hell said you could live in France?’

The man did not say anything for a second and Rodo caught a couple sitting on a bench near the trees that lined the sidewalk. Probably tourists for that painting. ‘I’d like your name so I can notify the proper authorities,’ the black man went on. ‘You should not go around pushing small children.’ The boy had since stopped crying and all the little buggers were standing around, staring stupidly at them, eyes wide. Rodo looked away from the man, turning to plan an escape route. Before he could turn around a scream came from one of the children, then another screamed and still another, as Rodo turned to find Bruno holding a knife to a child’s throat. He was small and blond and he kept squirming as Bruno held the knife at his neck. Apparently kids this small don’t understand that when someone’s got a weapon to your throat you hold still lest they cut you or get scared and decide to go through with it.

The boy kept squirming and screaming while the other kids yelled as well and some of them started crying, especially the girls, though the boys were too.

‘Bruno stop that!’ Rodo yelled desperately at his friend. ‘Stop it, you don’t want to. You’ll go to prison, they’ll find you.’

‘Fuck you, they will not,’ Bruno cried, still holding the knife as the man responsible for the children held his hands up pleadingly.

‘Look, no one is going to hurt you,’ he said calmly and his Caribbean accent was warm and soothing. ‘I just want you to give me my kid back. Please, he’s a child, he doesn’t know any better, just please, put him down.’

Rodo looked over at the couple. The girl was on a mobile phone, looking desperately at the scene as the man stared forward as if he weren’t seeing anything.

‘Please,’ Jean said and he hoped that he conveyed just enough desperation to get the kid’s attention, but not enough so that he might seem weak. Punks like this, kids, did not respond well to weakness. ‘Look, take me instead,’ he offered and the kid squeezed Bradley’s neck harder.

At that Jean rushed at him, pulling the punk’s arm hard enough so that Bradley could wriggle free. When he was safely with the other children Jean stood before the punk and his friend. The one with the knife rushed at him, knocking the side of his elbow, before dropping the knife and running in the opposite direction. The other kid stood stupified for a second before bending over and picking up his friend’s knife.

‘Give me that,’ Jean called, taking the knife from the kid in a single, swift motion. The other kid just stood there looking at the ground, and then out at a couple sitting on a bench near the trees. ‘Get out of here,’ Jean yelled and the kid took off.

Once the threat was over and there was no need to worry, the kids started crying, all of them, all at once, blue shirts and red shirts, yellow, purple, green and pink, all of the shirts with

snot and tears on them as they wandered around a one foot radius bawling their eyes out. Jean checked his elbow, where the kid had gotten him. It stung a little but nothing bled, there were no marks. Apparently it had been a dull knife.

‘All right, it’s okay,’ Jean said, still holding the knife. ‘We can’t go to the park today, Monsieur Jean has to take you back to school so that I can talk to the police about the bad man who did this. I need to report this,’ he added as if the kids knew what this all meant.

‘But you said we were going to the park,’ Jacques complained, whining now. ‘We didn’t do anything wrong and now we can’t go to the park.’ He crossed his arms over his chest, looked away from Jean and pouted.

‘Sometimes that’s how things work out. But tomorrow I’ll make sure we get to the park, okay?’ Most of the kids nodded at this, willing to be on their way. Even Jacques walked in line, back through the island and to their school.

‘Interesting day,’ Jean called to the couple on the bench and the woman looked to him, smiling as she waved.

‘Yes, I called the police, they’ll be here in a little while,’ she said.

‘Thank you. I’m going to take these kids back to school and then I’ll come here to talk to them. They’ve been through enough today and if I don’t get them back the police will never let them go.’

‘That’s fair,’ the girl called and the man she was with turned his head at the sound of her voice. ‘I’ll tell them that. We have nowhere to be, we’ll wait.’

‘Thank you, I’ll be back,’ Jean called once more before gathering the children and moving back down the island, knife in hand.

‘All the kids are ahead of him now,’ Lucy went on describing the scene to Julien. ‘And the man in charge, their teacher or something, he’s walking behind them with the knife in his hand. Maybe he should have left it here for the police. I hope he doesn’t forget it. But he’s walking away from us and the sun is still up in the sky and it’s white and clear and fresh and it looks like the way you feel when you’re dancing. And the Seine is just over a line of trees and it looks like . . . like you feel when you’re dancing and there are all these colours, except I can’t describe them, they’re just there, forever, colours on T-shirts, on fabric, on children, and I wish I knew what they were exactly, I wish there was a word I could use that was the essence of those colours, so I could explain them to you.’

‘That’s all right,’ Julien replied. ‘You’ve described the scene nicely. And you’re sure everyone is okay? And he’s coming back, so we’ll talk more to him. Maybe he knows where *Un dimanche après-midi à l’Île de la Grande Jatte* is located.’

‘That’s always possible,’ Lucy replied, resting her head on Julien’s shoulder as a quiet nestled over the middle of the afternoon, on a certain day of the week, on a particular island that is famous for couples in parks and people wandering.