

An Undisclosed Odyssey

At first I didn't see her. Fifty feet away, I was in my zone, photographing the magnificent sculptures within the walls of the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris. As the sound of the sloshing water registered in my mind, I turned to glance in her direction. *Wow, what an interesting shot –* I thought.

An elderly French woman was hunched over an ancient water pump. Clutching a walking cane and large handbag in one hand, she used her free hand to press down on the plunger at the top. Water gushed out from the spigot half way down and into her plastic watering can. The opportunity to capture this rare scene might last only a fleeting moment, so I swiveled my camera around on the tripod and started to snap shots of her. By the third frame, she was done and reached down to lift the watering can – but it didn't budge.

It was obvious that this fragile looking woman needed help carrying the heavy can to wherever she was going. So I grabbed my tripod and camera and jogged over to her. Up close, she looked to be in her nineties. But like most Parisian women, she was well groomed and wore stylish clothes including a colorful beret. Not daring to use my woefully inadequate French, I asked in English, "May I help you?"



She smiled and began talking to me in French, too rapid for me to understand. I leaned down to lift the watering can filled to the brim and followed her as she shuffled off with the aid of her cane. We went by one row of gravesites after another through the manicured cemetery grounds while she chatted away. When she paused in her monologue, I'd say, "*Mais oui.*" That prompted her to continue where she'd left off in her storytelling. I wasn't sure, but she must have assumed that I spoke fluent French. In the meantime, the watering can was getting heavier in my grasp.

The moment she stopped at a gravesite, her attention went from me to whoever was buried there. The timbre of her voice softened as she initiated a two-way conversation. I just didn't hear what was being said from the other side, but she obviously did. I set the can down on one side of me and spread the legs of my tripod on the other so I could rid myself of holding them. I was content to listen to this sweet lady converse with her deceased loved ones and try to guess what she was saying.

After finishing her tête-à-tête, she turned and motioned for me to sprinkle water on the well tended flowers growing in ceramic pots. When I finished, she slowly lowered herself down on an adjacent slab of black granite and patted a space besides her. I went ahead and sat next to her, not sure what was coming next.

A momentary silence was broken when she launched into an emotionally charged story. I caught the words *mère* and *père* for mother and father and now understood who was buried at the gravesite. Just as she reached over to hold my hand, she started to cry. No, this was not some muffled whimper, but full-fledged wracking sobs. Caught off guard, I also found myself getting choked up. Her cracking voice transformed itself from a frail old woman to that of a little girl. I

took a deep breath and proceeded to listen to her talk for the next ten minutes in a language I could barely understand. Occasionally she'd emphasize a point by squeezing my hand with surprising strength.

Then her voice trailed off to silence. After wiping her eyes she took a deep breath and looked over at me with a wan smile. She then brushed off her coat with gnarled hands, used her cane as a prop, and slowly stood up. I followed her lead. To my complete surprise, she said in clear English, "Thank you." I thought I detected a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. Then she reached over and gave me a hug. A moment later, she picked up her empty watering can and slowly walked away.

While strolling out of the cemetery with a smile on my face and camera equipment in hand, I remember thinking – *Thank you for choosing me to tell your very personal story.* Then I chuckled – *Surely you knew all along, it was safe with me.*