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I was no patriot – until I went to France. Maybe it was jetlag, but suddenly, there I was, defending the US

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I'm no patriot. I'm not a flag-waver, a lapel-pin-wearer or a God-Bless-America-shouter (besides, given the past few years, His answer is clearly "No"). Quite the contrary: I wonder if our tradition of cheering explosives on Independence Day sends the wrong message; I wonder if schoolchildren proudly singing about "bombs bursting in air" in some way explains my nation's current foreign policy; I'm relieved that my nation has finally nominated an African-American, but ashamed that they will never nominate an atheist-American. Heathen is the new black. I'm no patriot.

Then, a few weeks ago, I went to France. In a quiet village in the south of the Luberon, we took a small room in a quaint inn that turned out to be filled with warm, welcoming, obsequiously self-loathing Americans.

"Isn't it beautiful here?" a young woman asked over breakfast. "It is," I said. "So much nicer than America," said her husband. "America," she scoffed. "Nothing like this in America." They waited for me to respond. "No," I said. "There isn't." They smiled.

After breakfast ("Don't get breakfasts like that in America!" the man declared with a satisfied slap of his belly), we decided to visit Arles. We made a quick stop in Pern, where we ran into an elderly American couple at the local market. "Where are you from?" the woman asked. "New York," I said. "Isn't it awful?" "What?" "What's going on." "Where?" "There," she said, shaking her head in dismay. "Oh." "What do you think is going to happen?" she asked. "With what?" "Everything." I told her I didn't know. She shook her head again. "I've been telling people we're from Canada," she whispered.

In Arles, we walked behind an American couple who were lamenting the culture of consumerism plaguing the United States. We walked past Van Gogh posters, Van Gogh backpacks, Van Gogh sunglasses and Van Gogh dolls. "It's just so different here," the woman said, stopping to look at some Van Gogh handbags.

Something began to stir inside me, and it wasn't anything good. It felt a lot like patriotism, which felt a lot like when I've had too much caffeine.

The following morning we went to an art exhibition in Les Baux. "Nothing like this in America," whispered the American woman beside me. Her friend laughed at the very idea. "No," she said. "Nothing like this." "Well, they have something like this," I said.

Maybe it was the adolescent contrarian within me. Maybe it was the knee-jerk reactionary. Maybe it was just the jetlag. But God help me, I started to love America.

"Like this?" the woman asked. "Yes," I said. "They're called museums." The woman sneered at me. "Not like this they don't," she said, and together she and her friend walked off through the lobby that was better than any lobby in America, to the sidewalk that had no stateside equal, where they stopped at a vending machine unlike any vending machine in the contiguous 48 states.

France, I thought. Please. It's been going downhill here ever since Voltaire. spent the next three days condemning a nation I didn't care to condemn and defending a nation I didn't care to defend. What was happening to me? Suddenly I cared about my nation. I had put country first. I had valiantly defended her honour. I had become everything I hated.

On our last day, as we walked through the town one final time before heading home, we spotted a large American flag hanging on a tall iron gate. A cowboy walked past me carrying a bag full of baguettes. He met up with a cowgirl holding a tray of croissants and they kissed one another's cheeks three times. We followed them through the gate to where a band stood on a makeshift stage playing country and western music.

"You like country and western music?" I asked the cowboy. "We love it!" he said. "Why?" I asked.

I hate country and western music. When I hear it, I can feel the wrinkles in my brain filling. Half the songs are about why America is great. The other half are about why God is great. Then there are a few about why God thinks America is great, and a couple about why America can't be great without God. Then, a bunch about guns and a couple about love.

"We love all things about America!" shouted Monsieur Cowboy. Then he shouted "Yee-haw," waved his hat and started to square dance.

I realised then with great relief, as I watched him dancing and pictured strangling him with his own plastic lasso, that I didn't hate the French. And I didn't hate Americans. I just hated people. Which is why I don't like countries very much, mine or anyone else's. Countries are just places, places that are filled with people. That's a deal-breaker for me.

We stood there a while longer, watching Frenchmen sing and dance like narrow-minded xenophobic Americans, and then we went back to the hotel, where our American friends sat around talking about how much they would prefer to be phony, xenophobic Frenchmen, and then we started to pack our bags. It would only be a few more hours before I would be back home, where I could triple-lock the door behind me, draw the blinds, disconnect the phone, cut off the internet and try to convince myself that the world outside, and the people within it, were finally, blissfully gone.

• This week Shalom read EM Cioran's *The Trouble with Being Born*: "Imagine the worst mood you've ever had, and now imagine there's someone for whom that mood would be the best mood they ever had. Now imagine they wrote a book." He watched Mickey Mouse Clubhouse with his son: "But had a difficult time explaining what meth is and why Goofy likes it so much."

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