“There you are,” the clerk seemed genuinely happy to see me as I walked into the shop, “what can I do you for?”

“Why did you ask me in English?” I wondered.

“You're American aren't you?” The clerk seemed confused, “you do speak English, don’t you?”

“Well, yes and yes,” I laughed, “it’s just that I hadn’t opened my mouth yet. I didn't realize I was that obvious.”

“An American in Paris is easy to spot,” the clerk laughed, “especially a rock-n-roller like you. Can I show you some guitars today?”

“Sorry, but I only need strings today,” I disappointed the salesman.

“What kind’a axe you play, Man?”

“I need a set of strings for my Strat.” I replied.

“Let me guess,” the clerk grinned, “you want .10s, right?”

“Yeah, that's right, I do, I was impressed, “how’d you know?”

“American players always want .09s or .10s,” the clerk beamed, “they grew up with Slinkies. Americans love to bend. The French usually go for .11s. Germans want .12s, which are hard to come by and hard to play. It’s neither right nor wrong, it’s just different. But here,” he handed me a pack of strings, “these are essentially Super-Slinkies, but with better tone. They’re €10,00.”

“I didn't realize I was such a cliché,” I chuckled as I handed over a 10-euro note.
“Oh, I don't mean anything by it. I’m the same way,” the clerk offered his hand, “Tyler Milano, Red Bank, New Jersey! Good to meet you, Man. I always like it when Americans come into the shop.”

“I’ve been to Red Bank,“ I warmed up to Tyler, “I was there just last year, in fact. Great music and great food in that part of the world. What are you doing in Paris?”

“You first, Man?” Tyler volleyed, “you playin’ in town?”

“Nope, not playin’ at all. I've rented a loft in the Latin Quarter for the summer. I'm workin’ on a book.”

“Oh, you’re a writer?” Tyler's interest increased noticeably, “what's your book about?”

I gave my standard answer: “It’s about a traveling rock-and-roll band recording a concept album using masturbation as a metaphor for the search for the meaning of life and trying to solve a murder at the same time.”

“Of course it is,” Tyler laughed, “what else is there to write about? That's perfect. But hey listen, Man, since you’re a writer, I've got a story for you. You wanna hear a story?”

“Of course,” I confessed, “for one thing, I’d love to hear how an American kid finagled a gig in a Paris guitar shop?”

“Gimme a second,” Tyler excused himself, “I was about to grab a coffee. You want an espresso? Do you have a minute?”

“If you’ve got a story, I’ve got time,” I tentatively accepted.

“There’s a cafe across the street,” Tyler pointed out the window, “I'll meet you there in two minutes. Coffee’s on me.”

“Cool, I can’t say ‘no’ to that. See you there…” I exited the shop, picked out a sidewalk seat at the cafe, and waited...

“So, you ready for your story?” Tyler asked when he arrived as he signaled the waiter for “deux double-espresso, s’il vous plaît.”
“Lay it on me,” I prepared myself to actively listen.

“So, in the spring of 2016,” Tyler settled into his chair, “my band was doin’ a house gig in a club in Asbury Park. We got a call from Günter Schmidt — he’s a German promoter — he’d seen us play and wanted us to front the upcoming summer tour for The Avantronics. You know them?”

“No, I don't think I do,” I confessed.

“Americans rarely do,” Tyler continued, “doesn’t matter. They're a German alternative rock band with a huge following all over Europe. They play sold-out shows, so getting a chance to tour with them was an awesome stroke of luck for four kids from Jersey.”

“Congratulations,” I nodded, “very cool. So I’m hoping you did the tour?”

“Well, we almost didn't; that's the story,” Tyler revealed, “when we first got the call, everybody was pumped. All excited. A genuine European tour. All expenses covered. Plus a paycheck on top. How could you say ‘no’ to that?”

“You couldn't, obviously,” I understood.

“But at the last minute, our bass player refused to go.”

“What? Why?”

“He became convinced we’d all be killed by terrorists as soon as we stepped off the plane.”

“Oh, Jesus! I have idiot-friends back in the states like that,’ I laughed, “I hear it all the time.”

“Exactly,” Tyler nodded, “so I tried to explain to Digger — that was our bass player’s name — Digger — that he had a better chance of getting hit by a bus while riding his skateboard than being killed by a terrorist.”

“Okay, my turn to guess: he didn’t want to bother with the actual numbers, right?”

“Couldn’t be bothered to learn anything at all,” Tyler nodded, "I tried, time and again, to explain to him that his fear and ignorance was making him miserable and
ruining his life. Of course he didn’t want to hear it. He just wanted to smoke pot and watch Fox News all day. So the day after the actual physical plane tickets arrived by courier, Digger announces he’s not coming on tour with us. His actual words were: ‘*They got Muslims over there. Don’t come crying to me when y’all get killed by terrorists.*’”

“So basically,” I indicated I was familiar with the phenomenon, ‘he’s one of the 35% that are thrilled with the way things are going in America right now.”

“You got it,” Tyler nodded, ‘the French have a word for those people; they call them ‘collaborators’ — it’s a hold-over from their experiences with the Nazis during World-War-II. The only thing a freedom-loving Parisian detests more than a fascist is a deplorable who collaborates, normalizes, and supports fascism. The French reserve the deepest circle of hell for *The Collaborators.*”

“So what’d you do, Man,” I wanted to know, “I mean about the tour?”

“I had to call Günter and tell him Digger wasn’t going to get on the plane,” Tyler recounted, “it was one of the hardest phone calls of my life. We’d given our word. Günter’d paid for all the travel in advance, based on our promises. There was a very real risk that everything would blow up in our faces and the tour would be canceled.”

“So how’d he take it?” I grimaced, “how’d it turn out?”

“Günter said he didn’t want any collaborators on the tour anyway. He asked if we could replace Digger.”

“And could you?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Tyler shrugged, ‘it took me less than a day to find a replacement. Are you kidding? Who wouldn’t jump at an all-expense-paid European tour? We did the tour with a fill-in bass player. And it was great! The Avantronics treated us like family from Day-1. We played Paris, London, Liverpool, Dublin, Düsseldorf, Hamburg, Munich, Barcelona, Madrid, took a break to go sailing in Mallorca for a week with a bunch of models and millionaires, then finished up with shows in Berlin, Cologne, Zurich, and Lisbon before flying back to the States.”

“Sounds incredible, Man,” I tried to imagine all the fun.

“Oh you have no idea,” Tyler reveled, “we met girls, made lifelong friends, partied like there was no tomorrow, woke up in strange hotel rooms, got lost on our way to
the gigs, experienced things we’d never get to do at home, and basically had the
times of our lives.”

“So whatever happened to Digger,” I assumed Digger was the reason for the story.

“I’m getting to that,” Tyler took his first sip of coffee, “less than a week into the
tour, after the show in Dublin, we were all sitting in a pub in Temple Bar with a
few of the locals enjoying the afterglow of the show, when Fingers — Fingers was
our fill-in-bass-player — revealed some news: He said he heard from a buddy,
back in the States, that while we were over here livin’ like international rock stars,
Digger booked himself some solo shows in one of those restaurant/bars down on
the Jersey shore.”

“Let me guess,” I laughed, “he got hit by a bus while riding his skateboard?”

“No, worse,” Tyler chuckled, “after his first solo show at his new gig, Digger
mislplaced his guitar case. While he was looking for it in the back of the restaurant,
he evidently got frustrated, lost his shit, and started accusing the kitchen staff of
stealing it.”

“And it was probably right where he left it,” I surmised.

“Probably, but that's not the interesting part,” Tyler winked, “Digger got so upset
about misplacing his guitar case that he started shouting and swearing at the
kitchen crew. He threatened to call immigration on ‘em. Of course, he assumed
they were all illegals. Evidently, he repeatedly shouted ‘you fuckin’ Mexicans’
throughout his tirade loud enough and often enough that they had to call the cops.
Needless to say, he got escorted off the premises and fired after his first gig.”

“Well, now he has more time to sit at home and watch Fox News,” I recognized the
reason Tyler wanted to tell me the story.

“So that night in Temple Bar,” Tyler recalled, “Fingers — Fingers was our fill-in
bass player — Fingers raised his glass and toasted: ‘Here’s to Digger. Thanks to
him, I get to experience people, places, and parts of the world I may never have
seen if Diggers wasn’t such a dumbass.’ And that became our band motto from
that day on. We repeated that toast at every show for the rest of the tour.”

“Well thank you,” I finished my coffee, “you’re right that’s a particularly
interesting story. It illustrates one of the more obvious ways racism, fear, and
ignorance is self-defeating. Do you mind if I use this somehow, somewhere,
someday?”
“Use it any way you want,” Tyler granted me permission, “but I do have one stipulation.”

“What’s that?”

“When you write it,” he suggested, “I want you to call it: ‘The Decline and Fall of the American Empire.’”

“I see where you’re goin’ with that,” I negotiated, “but most people aren’t ready to make that connection. How about if I just make it about Digger and call it ‘The Collaborator?’”

“Okay,” Tyler acquiesced, ‘but make it ‘Collaborators’ — plural, with an s on the end — because if it was just about Digger, it’d just be sad. But the real problem — the danger — the threat — the tragedy — is that there’s so god-damn many of the fuckers.”