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Rolling Around: Paris by Night

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paris by night

Riddle: *What's the difference between Lincoln, Nebraska and Paris, France?*

- 1 In Paris, you're can skate in the streets!
- 2 If you see police on rollerskates in Lincoln, you're dreaming!
- 3 The Louvre is in Paris, and the whole block north of it is an asphalt plaza open to skating every night of the summer.
- 4 In Paris every Friday night at 10, a river of skaters floods through a 20-25K course, leaving the occasional misplaced motorist cowering by the curb.



We have a daughter, Ruth, working in France for Rhodia Rare Earths in La Rochelle. She's a chemical engineer. The Sugar Plum had visited her in March when I was still stuck in classrooms. June was my turn. I'm in France, first in La Rochelle, then a four-night weekend in Paris.

Ruth put us on the TGV for Paris after knocking off early from work at noon Friday. We checked into a cheap hotel (5th floor, no elevator, bathroom down the hall!). In shoes, we reconnoiter some of the route from hotel to start point of the Pari-roller. I'm a bit doubtful (skating in strange new surroundings, no trails, lots of pedex and vehicle traffic) But I get the old skates on, helmet, bike shorts, T-shirt, plus knee, wrist, and elbow armor. I stuff the wallet in the jockstrap-band and venture out.

Once rolling, doubts are gone. I turn to Ruth, who has walked down with me. "I'll be fine," I said. There's a skater up ahead. He's good. He's fast. I catch up and use my French. Pardon M'sieur. Est-ce que vous

aller au Pari-roller?

"Oui," he says.

"Bien. Je te suis." "Great." I said. I'm following you." (Writing this I realize I automatically had switched from the formal vous to the between-friends-and-relatives tu. We're skaters.) We introduce ourselves. I'm Dan. I'm Tom. Explained I just got into Paris an hour ago, for the first time ever.

Worries? Figured I couldn't get in much trouble doing what a local skater was doing. Hey, even though this is the Rue St Michel (traffic!) now we're out in the street!

It's ok, it's a bus lane, and bikes and skaters are in it! Minutes later we're there. I thank him, and scope the growing crowd.

The assembly place is between a main train station (Montparnasse) and the ugliest modern tower in town. People hand out skate catalogs. The yellow Pari-roller van is a HQ on wheels. One brochure invites teams to

compete at Le Mans 24-hour team race at the most famous track in the world! Finally, it's 10 o'clock. Still twilight. (Sunset was about 9 p.m.)

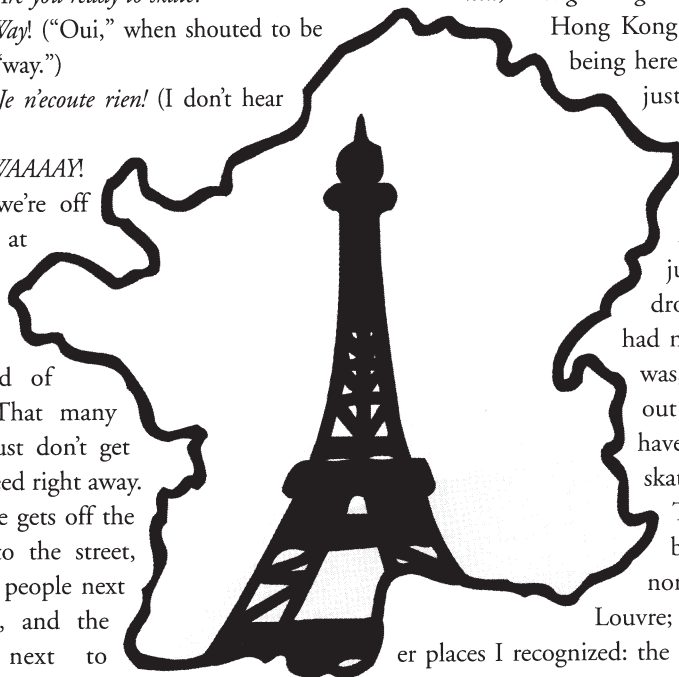
Speaker: *Are you ready to skate?*

Crowd: *Way!* ("Oui," when shouted to be heard, is "way.")

Speaker: *Je n'ecoute rien!* (I don't hear nuthin!)

Crowd: *WAAAAAY!*

And we're off — slowly at first, like the proverbial herd of turtles. That many people just don't get up to speed right away. One edge gets off the plaza into the street, then the people next to them, and the people next to



The Paris Police help keep the Friday Nite Skate roll smoothly.



them... How many people? More than you can believe. On the way back the woman next to me on the plane described the effect. "We saw skaters outside our hotel window. They just kept coming and coming. There must have been thousands of them. We waved at them."

"I waved back!" I replied. Yes, there were thousands. At one point there is a big long downhill, then an 8-block-long straight. I look back. Behind me blocks and blocks of 4-lane street are chock full of skaters still coming over the top like a waterfall. Four lanes are chock full for the 3 blocks ahead. You hear the urethane-on-asphalt whirr of thousands of wheels and bearings rolling, rolling. We were a river. We were a Niagara.

When a turn came up, those turning raise the right or left hand high as a sign to those coming on behind them; for a stop or a necessary deceleration, the warning sign is to raise both hands high.

There were several stops for the police to get ahead and clear intersections. During these, I sometimes heard some English and edged through to introduce myself and chat. *Indiana, Nebraska, Maryland, California, Hong Kong!* The guy from

Hong Kong said "Imagine being here for a year and just finding out about this!"

Miles passed. I surrendered and just skated like a drop in the river. I had no idea where I was, and breaking out on my own, I'd have been lost. Just skate along! Wow! The midway break was at the north side of the Louvre; there were other places I recognized: the Comedie Fran-

caise, for instance. A treat to see these places lit at night.

Sometimes the mass deceleration sign was for a car stuck in the stream. Nothing for its passengers to do but just wait for police help, then creep to the side of the street and wait by the side of the street for the river to pass. I've died and gone to heaven! Just dream of police help to get the cars out of your skating way back in the U.S! Surprisingly, the people in cars or on scooters or motorcycles waiting at intersections didn't seem annoyed at the wait. Their visible good-will toward skaters was a real heart-warming surprise. I have the feeling that American drivers would've been swearing and shaking their fists!

Helmets were pretty rare. I counted ten all night – me and nine others, not counting the police on skates, who looked pretty natty in their blue uniforms and coordinated blue bike helmets. The skaters were a pretty savvy bunch. Only one was seen using a slalom for downhill speed control. There just isn't room for that! Asphalt-skiing is for solo runs! I said nothing, for I was sure he'd figure it out pretty quick! I found the lunge position from fencing was all the downhill speed control needed.

Only saw two wipeouts: an American in kneeguards and wristguards went down on all fours; then there was a young woman in front of me plainly fighting to stay vertical. She lost it and went down; seeing it coming, I managed to slip around and not trip, and heard her cries of pain behind me. No pads or guards there! The guy who landed on his knee- and wristguards got right back up and into the skate. Police and Pari-roller organizers were dealing with first-aid. At one stop, there was an ambulance, but I never found out if it was for one of us.

Back to Montparnasse Station and familiar territory. I rejoined Ruth, who, being editor of a Rocky Horror Picture Show fanzine (Crazed Imaginations), was still up with the Paris Friday night Rocky crew, some of whom were impressed with Ruth's pere: They'd tried the Pari-roller and hadn't the stamina for a 3-hour skate! What a wonderful night to remember all your life!

Sound good? Want to go? See the Pari-roller website for history and details. Their up-front warning is be sure everybody in your group can stop on very steep slopes!

It's www.pari-roller.com