

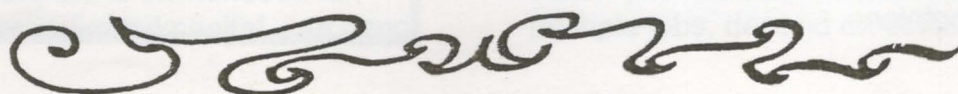
# PROUST SAID THAT

Issue No. 9

September 2017



*In This Issue: 1,111 Days of Caffè Proust, The Dreyfus Affair,  
Proust at Cabourg, The Marcel Proust Support Group  
Headquarters, The Proust Wake of 2016, Strawberry Mousse,  
and more*





## A Special Announcement:

Issues 1 -8 of *Proust Said That* can be viewed online on the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine:

<https://archive.org/details/proustsaidthat&tab=collection>

## Twitter For Prousties

Twitter is a social media phenomenon where users can find their tribes. There's "Housing Twitter," where the minutiae of housing policy goes on and on, for example. We also have a Proust nut contingent, where I have found kindred spirits. If you share my mania, I fully recommend following these people:

### @ProustTweet

Patrick Alexander, author of *Marcel Proust's Search for Lost Time* (Vintage), retells the story of *In Search of Lost Time* in 140 characters a day. You can know exactly what happens throughout the work without ever having to open a book.

### @MarcelitaSwann

Marcelita links us to all the loveliest things Proust, taking us to the places, events, and topics that make up the splendid Proustian cosmology.

### @ cfj71

Louis Patrice, a writer and journalist, is *Le fou de Proust*. His website explores the fine points, details, little known information, the French Proust world, and of course the art and charm of our favorite author. It's in French.

### @mspsegal

C'est moi. Peppered with Proustiana, my Twitter feed tends to reflect a lot of my fairly unpopular opinions.

***Proust Said That*** is the unofficial organ of the equally unofficial Marcel Proust Support Group of San Francisco, of which I am, to my knowledge, the lone active member. There are, out there in the world, members I don't know, or haven't yet met, who are part of my Proustian tribe, and as we said in the Cacophony Society, you may already be a member of the Marcel Proust Support Group.

This is the first issue of *Proust Said That* to appear in 17 years. A lot has happened since then, the highlights chronicled in this issue. I was inspired to do it all again for one very strong reason: As I watched the political situation descend into chaos in America and viewed the increasing hostility of warring ideologies, I was reminded of Proust's description of the effects of the Dreyfus Affair on French society. France recovered from the Dreyfus Affair, and we can recover from what ails us now. I started writing about it, and once I began to write about Proust again, I couldn't stop. Ergo, Issue Number 9.

Huge thanks to Alex Segal for his watercolor portrait of Proust on this issue's cover and to Dean Gustafson for the painting of Caffè Proust. Both pieces are treasures of my collection. Special thanks to Marcelita Swann, who has promised me a Pocket Proust and has been such an extraordinary supporter. And thanks to all the friends who have contributed, one way or another, to this issue and my life.

To send comments, critiques, submissions, contributions, orders for hard copies, or letters, you can use this address:

[mspsegal@gmail.com](mailto:mspsegal@gmail.com)





# The 1,111 Nights of Caffè Proust



Caffè Proust by Dean Gustafson 2002

*"There were in this cafe... plenty of foreigners, intellectuals, budding geniuses of all sorts."*

*—The Guermantes Way*

The issue of *Proust Said That* you are seeing now is the first one in 17 years. Some readers may recall that I put out that last issue while I owned the San Francisco restaurant of my dreams, Caffè Proust. Recovering from that sweet folly has taken all these years.

Owning a restaurant is tremendous fun when you have unlimited capital, can send

other people to deal with the bureaucracy for you, and don't care if it makes money. I could say none of those things about myself. I actually opened the doors, on Proust's birthday in 1999, with no money in the bank at all. You can pay other people to do everything you don't want to do when you have an elastic operating budget. When you have no budget at all, you do multiple jobs, depend on sales to cover



your costs, and hope there's something left over. You do everything you can't pay someone to do for you.

Sometimes you're mopping the kitchen floor at midnight, especially if the cell phone tele-tree announced an impending immigration raid. I worked relentlessly, about 14 hours a day, during the Caffè Proust years, and except for the bills and books, it was still amazing fun—that immense, deep pleasure you get from making something wonderful happen, against all odds, in your own, idiosyncratic way. It was working hard at playing very, very hard.

The brilliant restaurant industry of San Francisco owes its reputation to generations of illegal immigrants. They are the people who make your food, in most restaurants, and almost invariably wash the dishes, except in Asian joints. Without an efficient dishwasher, the entire professional chain of command in a restaurant kitchen goes to hell rather quickly. Behind that lovely plate of restaurant food is a tight choreography of skilled performers in a relentless, well-timed dance of functions: ingredients prepped, sauces ready, desserts made, line cooks and chefs coordinating the finished product without a single wasted movement—hopelessly bogged down without a ready supply of clean pans, plates, glasses, and silverware.

Kitchen staffs aren't paid that much. A lot of the Caffè Proust workers had two jobs, so they could send money home to wives in Mexico. Many of them lived 10 to an apartment, sleeping in the beds in shifts, to send as much as possible. In spite of their

exhausting work, the people in the kitchen seemed to have the most fun. Before the doors opened each day, Radio Romantica boomed in the back, often drowned out by laughter. One afternoon, as the prep crew raced to get everything ready, our gay Mexican chef, Martine, plunked a new mop head over his hair, stuck a scallion in his mouth like a rose, and regaled us with a salsa performance to Ricky Martin.

The front of the house was equally entertaining. I hired people with one overriding quality: charm. I could teach anyone to wait tables, but you can't teach someone to be genuinely warm, which comes from within. Our food was excellent, but we were not about fine dining. We were about fine living—and of course, about Proust.

Yes, I wanted to make money. I needed to, with no financial cushion, if I wanted the place to survive. There was an even stronger drive than the profit motive behind Caffè Proust, though. It was a commercial enterprise based on values like the 10 Principles of Burning Man, calling for things like radical inclusion; to be sure that just about anyone could come, we had a \$5 Starving Artist Special on the menu. The restaurant was about making a living, of course, but even more about community and a quality shared experience—good food, real human interactions, wonderful art and music, and Proust.

As we went through the long process of opening, we covered the windows all along the north and east facing windows of our

*"No doubt they were running, one to fetch the hors d'oeuvres, another to change the wine or bring clean glasses, But despite these special reasons, their perpetual course among the round tables, yielded, after a time, to the observer the law of it's dizzy but ordered circulation."*

*—Within a Budding Grove*



corner space with brown butcher paper, on which we'd written favorite quotes from Proust. We embedded quotes in elegant calligraphy into the thematic decoupage tabletops, each illustrating a theme in the oeuvre: the seaside, Venice, relationships, fashion, art, books, and so on. The Venice table, so frequently requested by regulars and now falling apart, is still my kitchen table.



Egg cups sauntering in Venice.

I had quite a staff of creative geniuses moving the project along: painters, a musician who had a contractor's license, a faux finish artist, designers, collage artists, a calligrapher, and general arty types. We spent three weeks just cutting and pasting images on the tables, so absorbed that a room full of gregarious people hardly spoke at all, but we had a great time. It took an enthusiastic community to make it happen, and perhaps that's why it felt so full of love.

## The Launch

In a neighborhood full of new, affluent tenants, but a dearth of restaurants, we got off to a great start. We were almost breaking even, six months into the venture, even with our used equipment falling apart, one piece after another, soon after opening. Our new techie neighbors were coming in and ordering five things, eating just a bit of each dish, and leaving all the rest, and also buying a few bottles of wine and leaving half a bottle. All of that was great for us, until the first dot-com bubble burst in early 2000. Suddenly there were plenty of empty apartments around us, a lot of empty tables in the restaurant, and still no money in the bank.

The bursting of the dot-com bubble might have killed us in infancy, were it not for Proust. Proust fanatics had been waiting for years for publication of an exhaustive biography by Jean-Yves Tadié. It was such a big deal that every high-toned publication was combing the Internet for Proust-related subject matter to enliven their coverage, and a lot of them found us. Eleven months after we opened, we appeared, in full color—and above the fold—on the front page of *The New York Times* Living Arts section, the kind of publicity that money couldn't buy.

We became something of a *destination*, compromised only by the fact that parking in our part of town was often an exercise in futility. Annual city "best of" competitions invented whole new categories for us to be the best of. Book clubs started meeting at our place, and that holiday season we catered a lot of parties. There were signs that we were going to survive, especially after a visit to the Small Business Administration, in early 2001, to see if we could get a business loan.

They sent me back to the restaurant with hope and an application form so long, complex, and microcosmic in detail that it took me many months to complete it, with a



14-hour workday nearly every day. But in August I submitted it and had an appointment to meet with the director.

The director of the San Francisco SBA had heard of Caffè Proust, because it was now appearing in real estate ads as a selling point, and we were drawing the foodie press. She was curious, wanting to know about our history, and one of the things she asked was how much it cost us to open. When I told her we'd spent \$60K, she actually goggled.

*"You... opened a restaurant... in San Francisco... for \$60K."*

I laughed. "With the help of a few dozen artist friends, yes."

She looked kind of stunned and asked how much money we needed and how we planned to use it. I told her the plans, throwing out \$100K hopefully.

"No!" she said. "That's ridiculous. You are a female business owner who opened a place for an insanely small amount of money, revitalized a neighborhood, and got international press with no marketing budget. We're giving you \$200K."

I left the SBA delirious with joy and a promise that I would have a check in three weeks. The next couple of weeks were among the most relaxed I can ever remember, even if I did work 14 hours a day, and didn't go to Burning Man as usual. In a few weeks, I would be able to pay myself a modest salary. We'd be able to launch an advertising campaign and have a cushion. Maybe even valet parking.

### **But Of Course**

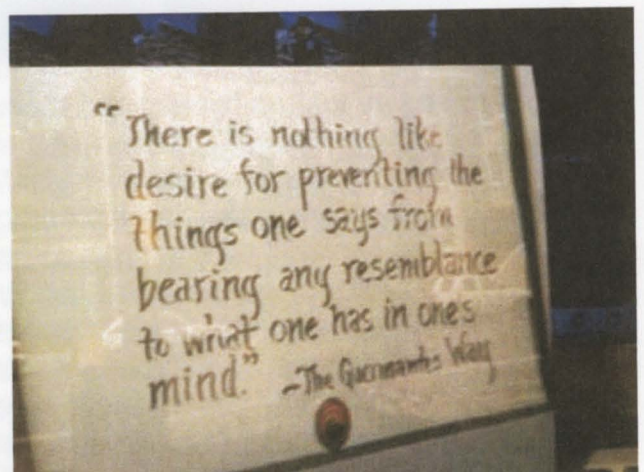
September 11 changed everything. One awful event fixed all of humanity in front of TV screens, observing over and over the stunning attack on American soil, and that

went on for months. A lot of people lost their jobs suddenly, businesses closed, and everyone was cautious, not sure if their job wouldn't be next on the block. Far fewer people went out, and nights would go by with hardly any customers. To add to the horror of the event, I knew our fixed expenses were about a thousand dollars a day, and every day there was no business, we were that much farther in the hole.

I lived through those days following the attack with one fixed thought, that in another week I would have the money to survive. My beloved staff would still have jobs, and we might have fewer dollars left, but we'd still be there. Those seven days, before I began flinging myself on the daily mail, dragged as we stood around waiting for customers, bolstering each other's sagging spirits with the reminder that help was on the way.

By the 22nd day after the SBA promise, the check had not arrived. I consoled myself with the likelihood that the SBA was as dysfunctional as everyone else in such troubled times. But after a month, I called the director to see about the hold-up.

All she could say was, "I'm so sorry."



One of our pre-opening window coverings

### **It Didn't Kill Us**



There was virtually no business at all for 90 days, while the country regrouped from the shock. Caffè Proust would have died, like hundreds of other restaurants in San Francisco, if people hadn't refused to let it go. The staff kept showing up, willing to work for tips. Kindly investors threw in some money. One old friend, who'd just had a big tech industry success, threw in a lovely bundle. To make our salvation sweeter, dozens of great musical groups offered to come in and play for us. Business picked up, with something wonderful happening every night, but we were still deeply in the hole. For a long time, the suppliers were understanding, letting us slide a bit, but we got no sympathy whatsoever from the landlord and the Board of Equalization, which could have given the Mafia some pointers in extortion tactics.

Still, we managed to hang on, approaching the magical 3-year point. If a business can last that long, it has a far greater chance of making it, or such is the conventional wisdom. We were planning a huge, glittering third anniversary party. Needless to say, because life is never that easy, there were things to deal with—like the faux energy crisis and rolling blackouts that killed our power. It was somewhat difficult to do business when the lights went out, and we never knew when it was going to happen.

### **But Something Finally Did**

One morning I came in to the restaurant from shopping and flipped on the kitchen lights. Nothing happened, so I assumed we were having a rolling blackout. I called the energy company and asked if we were in an affected area.

"No," they told me, "You didn't pay your bill."

"Yes, I did! I have the bank statement to show you got my payment."

"But you didn't pay the other amount above the 'amount due,' your unpaid balance."

"Look," I said reasonably, "I work 14 hours a day. When I sit down and pay bills, I look at the bottom line, amount due, and write a check for that. Why wasn't the unpaid balance in the amount due, too?"

I was fed an idiotic company line, but I wasn't done. "Okay, you can't just shut off someone's power without sending a 2-week notice and a 48-hour notice. I never got either."

"Well," she replied tartly, "Our computer sent them out, so you got them."

I snapped, "Congratulations. You have the only computer in the world that never has a glitch."

"You got them," she insisted. "So now you have to give us \$2000 in cash, if you want us to turn you back on."

We still had no money in the bank, and we had exhausted the generosity of benefactors. We sat in the dark at the restaurant for a couple of weeks—the kitchen staff, dining room staff, friends, and a few beloved investors—trying to come up with a way to save ourselves this time. I made endless calls requesting a cash infusion, and we got dozens of calls for reservations for the 3rd anniversary party, coming up in a few days. We knew we would make enough money that night to get the power company off our backs, if only we could manage to get the lights on.

We noticed, while we sat there in the dark, that painters had been at work in the empty flat above the restaurant, working late into the evening with the lights on. A couple of days before the party, when they had stopped working for the day and gone home, we quietly sneaked up the back



stairs to their kitchen door. We tried the knob gingerly. It was unlocked. The next night, when the painters left, we slipped up the back stairs and into the empty apartment, plugged in a huge power strip, and ran the long cord to our kitchen. We hooked up half a dozen clip-on lamps all over the kitchen, so the staff could see what they were doing, and inserted hundreds of candles everyone had brought into our combined collections of candelabrum, candlesticks, votive holders, tea light glasses, and other containers of flame. And then we went up to take away our power strip, literally praying that the door would be unlocked the next night, too, when the long-awaited party would happen.

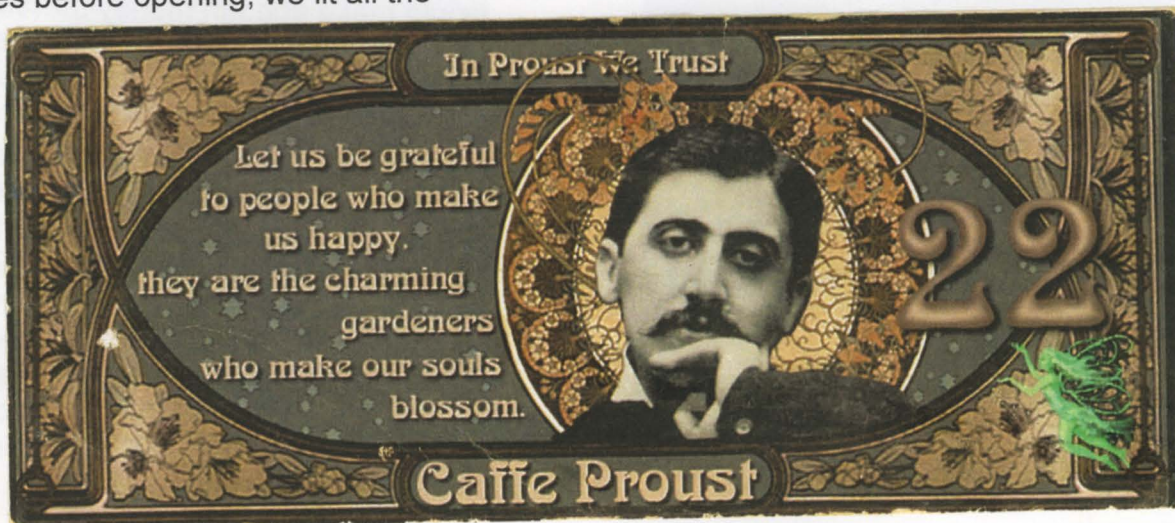
Weird jubilation filled Caffè Proust the next day, as we rolled in big ice chests filled with ice and all fresh ingredients for the day's special menu. The kitchen staff laughed all the way through prep, relying on daylight to see what they were doing. Some of them had come with us to run the Burning Man Central Camp Cafe, and this night reminded everyone of a camp banquet at the Black Rock.

It was a Saturday: the painters hadn't come, but we knew the door was unlocked. We had to check early, to make sure that we had power; otherwise, we would have had to call all the people who'd made reservations with our regrets. As soon as the daylight faded in the kitchen, we crept upstairs to plug in the power strip. A few minutes before opening, we lit all the

candles and the Edwardian room glowed like a magic castle. We all gasped at how lovely it was. Euphoria and the madness of this weird success thrilled and amused us, powering us through a memorable night. Of course we hadn't paid the city the fee to have candles on the tables, not to mention on the coffee tables, bar, back bar, toilet tank, bookshelf, and window ledges. It was magnificently out of compliance with city ordinance. The guests arrived and they too gasped in wonder, nearly every one of them.

If you were hosting that event, it went by in a blur of delighted faces. The string quartet, playing by candlelight as the evening ended, was a sensational Proustian finish. When the last guest finally left, we sat down to a celebratory meal together, giddy that we had pulled it off.

It took us a few days to actually get the light back on and return to regular business, but sadly in debt. The PG&E shut-off notices, which are supposed to be delivered 12 days apart, did finally arrive—both on the same day—several weeks later, mangled and ripped. By then, it was evident that the days of Caffè Proust were numbered. After our ultimate and equally memorable closing party, I counted the actual, wondrous, days that we had lived: 1,111.





# ***The Dreyfus Affair: Proust's Lessons for America in 2017***

America is more divided than usual, in these days of the 45th presidency, and it suits those in control of the country to keep it so. Our politicians pit us against each other, to keep us at war with other people, while they pocket the spoils of power. Having arrived at this state of culture wars, it's hard to know how to turn things around. Of course Proust had something to say about a country deeply divided, in his account of the Dreyfus Affair.

The case of a single man's purported act of espionage ripped French society into a tattered divide in 1894. Few seemed on the fence, or they made dramatic shifts in affiliation. You were either pro-Dreyfus or against, and the factions tore apart families, friendships, and the very basis of the French social hierarchy, aristocrats versus commoners. The Dreyfus Affair created new affiliations among those who would never otherwise unite, signaling the end of the old France and the beginning of the new.

It was clear, in 2008, when an eloquent, gracious, and accomplished black man rose to the highest office in the land that the old America was dying, that place of sexism, racism, xenophobia, profiteering, and corporatization. It is no surprise the successor should be the opposite, a crude paragon of corruption, misogyny, and greed, as the champions of the old ways raged against change in the pendulum swing of history. New America rises in opposition to a president and his posse of criminals against humanity, who exemplify the most craven of late stage capitalism, making a last, dying stab at total domination.

Proust's France was not as close to do-or-die choices we currently face in America. Scientists were not warning, at that time, of imminent environmental annihilation, and the streets were not filled with homeless people's tents. Income disparity was great but not inconceivable. Still, an issue not dissimilar to the current hysteria over our administration's very likely collusion with Russians—be it the Kremlin or gangster



Alfred Dreyfus

financiers—rocked France in much the same way the current presidency has polarized America, except at this point in human history, the stakes are dire.

The Dreyfus Affair's upending of French society began with a ripped up note found in a wastebasket of the Parisian German Embassy by a French spy. Reassembled, it conveyed top-secret information in handwriting that looked like that of the Jewish artillery captain, Alfred Dreyfus. Was Dreyfus guilty or not? Everyone had



an opinion. As the sides aligned, anti-Semitism surfaced, and voices of the press and every influential person of the day weighed in.

Alfred Dreyfus was convicted in 1896, and spent the next five years on Devil's Island. While he was languishing in the brink, other evidence surfaced, exposing the real culprit, Ferdinand Esterhazy. The military launched a big cover-up of the evidence, but were caught at it; Esterhazy was tried, but acquitted in a 2-day military court trial, Dreyfus remained in jail, and France remained divided, Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards.

The Dreyfus Affair's cast of collaborators that pinned the passing of state secrets to a foreign government onto poor Alfred Dreyfus, included among them a military figure by the improbable name of Paty du Clam, which sounds like a fried thing at a beachfront seafood dive. For a while, they got away with it. But the Dreyfusards would not give up. Their activism brought Dreyfus back to court for a retrial.

Perhaps the most powerful activist of all was the writer Émile Zola. His impassioned letter to president Felix Faure, *J'Accuse*, traced the deceitful injustices that kept Dreyfus on Devil's Island.

Zola wrote:

***"... From the historical point of view, events had to some extent seemed to justify the Dreyfusard thesis, the anti-Dreyfusard opposition had greatly increased in violence, and from being purely political had become social. It was now a question of militarism, of patriotism, and the waves of anger that had been stirred up in society had had time to gather the force which they never have at the beginning of a storm."***

***—Sodom and Gomorrah***

"Indeed, it is a crime to have relied on the most squalid elements of the press... who are now gloating over the defeat of justice and plain truth. It is a crime that those people who wish to see a generous France take her place as leader of all the free and just nations are being accused of fomenting turmoil in the country, denounced by the very plotters who are conniving so shamelessly to foist this miscarriage of justice on the entire world. It is a crime to lie to the public, to twist public opinion to insane lengths in the service of the vilest death-dealing machinations. It is a crime to poison the

minds of the meek and the humble, to stoke the passions of reactionism and intolerance, by appealing to that odious anti-Semitism that, unchecked, will destroy the freedom-loving France of the Rights of Man. It is a crime to exploit patriotism in the service of hatred, and it is, finally, a crime to ensconce the sword as the modern god, whereas all science is toiling to achieve the coming era of truth and justice."

Zola's words capture the same issues that confound America in 2017. "Squalid elements of the press," "a crime to lie to the public, to twist public opinion to insane lengths in the service of death-dealing machinations," "to poison the minds of the meek and humble," "appealing to odious anti-Semitism," "exploit patriotism in the service of hatred," and other phrases throughout the entire letter, sound exactly like what we grapple with in present day



America. Zola's experience in 19th century France was uncomplicated by Internet trolls and disinformation campaigns by foreign actors, which increasingly spark the flames of hate. Still, without the benefit of 21st century complications, the Dreyfus Affair split France into warring factions. But the activism of Zola and others did bring Dreyfus to court for a retrial.

Proust was a passionate Dreyfusard. Perhaps there is no stronger sign of his commitment than his daily attendance in court during the second trial. Proust did nothing in the morning—ever—except sleep, being a chronic and extreme night owl. But the fate of Alfred Dreyfus got him out of bed and in court every morning, and the Dreyfus Affair's division and regrouping of French society is a theme running throughout *In Search of Lost Time*.

In spite of the passionate, unrelenting attempts of activists and writers to bring justice for Alfred Dreyfus, the conviction was not overturned in the second trial. However, unlike so many cases of injustice, this story had a happy ending. President Fauré, the father of Proust's friend, the composer, pardoned Dreyfus and restored him to his military command. Justice served.

The take-away from the Dreyfus Affair is this: activism is powerful. Words are powerful. We can never stop writing and acting against the unjust and exhorting people to see the light. Writing, in particular, is frustrating; we send words out into the void with little concrete return, often getting

in response the negativity of those who would silence us. We send letters to politicians, wondering if there was any point to the effort. But to all those who have sent those letters, and got a vapid form letter in return, I offer this consolation: every letter a politician receives is believed to represent the opinions of 10,000 other people who can't take the time to write one.

***"Nobody will accuse the Dreyfus case of having such premeditated dark deigns upon Society. But there it certainly broke down its barriers.... Society is like sexual behavior, in that no one knows what perversions it my develop."***

***—The Captive***

And yes, America seems hopelessly divided in these dark days of 2017. But France, too, was deeply divided at the beginning of the 19th century, and the days of massive division passed. Conflicts can go away, or at least be relegated to unsavory simmers. We can't expect total agreement, even in the best of times, and

let's face it: it would be dull.

Write, march, and speak out for what is good and just. Without our voices, injustice wins. But I, an unrepentant optimist, can only repeat Zola's closing lines to *J'Accuse*: "I repeat with the most vehement conviction: truth is on the march, and nothing will stop it."





# The Eternal Proust at Cabourg



Marcel Proust by Edgar Duvivier

Last month, a life-sized sculpture of Proust, by Edgar Duvivier, was installed in front of the Grand Hotel at Cabourg. If Proust is watching from the great beyond, he would no doubt be pleased to have a permanent spot on earth at the Grand Hotel, in the town he called Balbec in the novels—a place where his narrator was to meet the most pivotal characters in the oeuvre, other than his relatives.

The delightful @MarcelitaSwann, my Twitter sister in Proust, alerted me to the sculpture's installation. I had thought that I was the most dedicated Proust fanatic out there, until I came to know Marcelita, who is such a devoted fan that her mailman knows to deliver mail with her Proustian handle. And through her, I have come to know others who share our obsession, like the



charming journalist and writer, Patrice Louis, known as Le Fou de Proust.

DuVivier's lively Proust captures the young man on a seaside vacation, wide open to what the world has to tell him, jaunty and a bit rakish, with a flower in his buttonhole. Broken free from the adoring coddling of grandmama, he is off to see what delicious treats await him in the resort, a favorite getaway for the wealthy. The work is even more remarkable because Duvivier isn't primarily a sculptor: he's a Brazilian jazz musician. You can go to his Facebook page to hear the sensual, hypnotic sounds of his music, and see the drawings prepared for the sculpture.

How this musician became a sculptor is a tale worthy of the subject himself, and one I learned from Marcelita. Edgar's father was originally commissioned to produce the work. However, when the elder Duvivier became gravely ill, and unable to complete the work, he taught his son how to sculpt. Edgar clearly learned immensely well.

After the installation, Duvivier decided to produce much smaller versions of the sculpture, which he called "Pocket Prousts." I learned about them, as I now learn about so many things, on Twitter, when Marcelita

posted a photo of the mini Prousts. I instantly and enthusiastically tweeted, "I want one!"

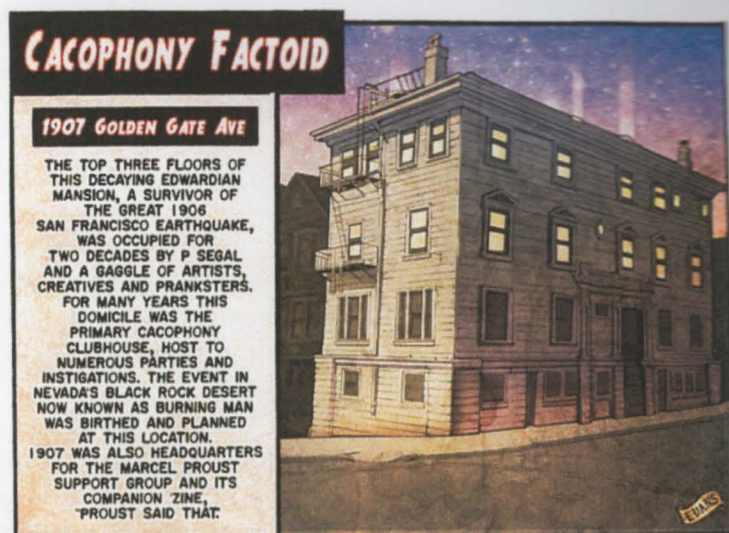
Marcelita wrote back, "Don't worry, I'll get you one, to thank you for Proust Said That." That one amazingly generous gesture taught me two things. The first was that a writer might feel like their efforts are futile, since the monetized world offers slim rewards for their production, but that writer's words may find one receptive mind in which they fully resonate. A single fan, like Marcelita, makes the countless hours of writing those past issues worthwhile, as well as making the revival of a long-abandoned labor of love sound like a great way to escape the constant political anxiety of the present.

The second thing I learned from this experience is that the hours and hours of staring at Twitter over the last eight years have not been wasted. It of course gave me wide access to opinions I respect and news I could trust. But perhaps closer to my heart is a found friend in Proust, a fan who provides me with the warmest public relations. And because of Twitter, and this felicitous connection, I will soon have one of Edgar Duvivier's Pocket Prousts.





# Remembrance and Return: 1907 Golden Gate



from Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society  
edited by John Law, Carrie Galbraith and Kevin Evans  
Drawing by Kevin Evans

If you have read the first eight issues of *Proust Said That* (or any of them, for that matter) you may recall accounts of 1907 Golden Gate, The Marcel Proust Support Group of San Francisco's home base. Designed by the Brown Brothers—two of the architects of City Hall—for themselves, 1907 was once a luxury Edwardian apartment. It was improbably grandiose, replete with hidden staircases, columns, and an all-redwood back parlor, embellished with every period architectural gewgaw imaginable. By the time I got it, in 1984, it was a jewel in the inner city, somewhat restored, but also, on the outside, still dilapidated.

It was the perfect place for arty people to live—so visually alluring that it stimulated creative work, but just run down enough to make art in. A fastidiously impeccable mansion can repress the creative urge, when a random spot of paint demands some expensive restoration. Grand but comfortably imperfect is just right for encouraging the creative process

For 19 years and 11 months, I lived in this 4800 square foot, 2-story flat with a lot of fascinating and unusual people, the vast majority of them artists of one sort or another. My fellow tenants had one similarity to Proust's cast of characters: people might appear and disappear from



the plot, as needed, but they kept coming back, to live again within its walls, or to simply be part of the 1907 family—and certainly for the parties, which were massive, elaborate, and frequent. When 1907 was still in the un-gentrified zone, no one complained about noise. Events at 1907 figured rather prominently in the social life of the city's diverse creative communities.

The party season at 1907—not including things like the monthly meetings of the Marcel Proust Support Group of San Francisco in the redwood back parlor, birthdays, and Cacophony events—once began with Halloween, a holiday we took seriously, with a month of preparation. Regarding those extravaganzas, I can only say this: one old friend said that his dying words would be, "Tell P thanks for the Halloween parties." But from 1990 on, after our first year at Burning Man, the party season began in early October with the first Decompression parties. After seven years, those parties got too big, even for 1907, and the project threw their own decompressions, which now shut down four city blocks.

After 1994, there were annual Proust Wakes. But there had been, from the first year in that flat, the universal favorite: Twelfth Night. On the twelfth day of Christmas, when the holiday folderol was over for another year, Twelfth Night was a light in the dull, dark month of January. It was also a great time to snatch up half price Christmas everything and perfect trees left out on the sidewalk. We were certainly the only place in town that didn't get the tree or lights up until after New Year's Day.

It was always a party of sorts at 1907, even if the only people there were the residents, because just sitting around the kitchen table

was invariably entertaining. Friends dropped by all the time to add to the good company, and it was the unofficial clubhouse of the San Francisco Cacophony Society. We planned Burning Man there for the first few years, and came up with ideas for the Proust Support Group, SantaCon, and hundreds of other events. We celebrated some traditional holidays as well, like the annual feast of seven fishes on Christmas Eve. That was all in the last years of San Francisco's affordability. Now a dinner for a few friends is a drain on the budget.

Using that perfect party house to entertain the overlapping communities we were part of served, in small part, the social good. It was also, ironically, a place where the advent of desktop publishing and social media would find early enthusiasm. We initially saw social media as a means to promote gathering. In reality, it eventually became a substitution for it.

Shortly after we lost the restaurant, we also lost the flat. A woman bought the building for her son, so he could have a career, and his business plan included evicting below market rate tenants like us. He coveted 1907, and we got an owner move-in eviction—my second in a row. I begged the new landlord to let us stay until Halloween Day, 2004, the 20th anniversary of moving in. Naturally, he said no.

Gentrification swept through our corner of the city like a hurricane, and I have to admit to our part in it. Inevitably, when artists move into a cheap neighborhood, they make it stimulating, and then get driven out by people who want to bask in that creative ambiance. Opening a restaurant that realtors noted, to make properties sound more attractive, didn't help curtail the gentrifying, either.



The only things that remains of those years at 1907 are the building, the memories, and the references to it in articles and books. *Proust Said That* is full of memoria of that place, where every issue was made—until this one. For a dozen years, I couldn't even walk by it without succumbing to rare pangs of nostalgia. I am not by nature nostalgic, loving, as I do, the process of making something new happen—but the rapid disappearance of the old city, under the sleek veneer of our new prosperity, makes one so, from time to time.

I thought 1907 Golden Gate was forever only a remembrance of things past, a place hovering somewhere in my psyche, where, to this day, I can see the architectural details of every corner. At the end of last year, though, the universe reminded me to unfailingly question my assumptions and use the words "never" and "forever" sparingly.

I got an email from a young woman, around the time when the 1907 party season would have been in full swing. She said that she and a group of friends had all moved to San Francisco for jobs in the tech industry, and nine of them had moved into a great apartment. Out of curiosity, they looked up their address online, to see what they could learn about the building. She found the articles online about our exploits and asked if I was the same person who had lived at 1907 Golden Gate.

Noga and her roommates invited me to dinner, and I immediately accepted. For days before we met, I tried to imagine what it was going to be like, being there again.

The night we chose to meet, I stood outside the building feeling anxious to go in. How would I feel, seeing this place I loved so much and lost? Disenfranchised? Jealous? Sad?

**"... the true paradises are the paradises that we have lost."**

**—Time Regained**

I was relieved to feel none of those things, as I saw the changes to the old flat. The meandering hallways, broken by a small room with seven doors, had been straightened into one long line. Everything was white, even walls of the former all-redwood back parlor. It wasn't the same place. Being there was not unlike running into an old love you no longer find attractive. I felt one painful stab when I saw their kitchen; as much as I had spent some of the best years of my life in the old one, I deeply regretted never having had this superior space, and wondered what I could have done in it.

Over dinner, my charming new friends told me that they want to throw a party for "the ghosts of 1907," the friends who had socialized there for so long. When I told old friends about this amazing offer, everyone said, "Twelfth Night!" So maybe this January, we will all gather at 1907, to repeat an experience we thought we'd never have again.





# The Proust Wake of 2016

Once upon a time in San Francisco, the city was full of artists, pranksters, and a thriving underground arts social scene. The annual wake for Marcel Proust got so big that we exceeded our guest limit at the infamous—and suitably atmospheric—John Wickett Museum of Exotica, and we could no longer hold them there.

We still had the marvelous, if crumbling, 1907 Golden Gate, and Caffè Proust, for alternative venues. But after the debacle of 9/11, I closed the restaurant in 2002, and in less than two years, I got an owner move-in eviction from the two-story, 14-room flat that was the scene of a thousand memorable events.

I moved into a much smaller place, with a living room scarcely wider than the big bay window, and for a long time, I went to graduate school instead of throwing parties. Slowly, in my absence from the social world, one friend after another was forced out of town. If I threw events, they were smaller, because fewer and fewer friends lived near-by any longer. And for the new friends, this event had no meaning.

However, when 2013 rolled around, I had to throw a Proust Wake. That year marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Swann's Way*, the first book of the incomparable *In Search of Lost Time*. The bay area's Proust fanatics were throwing events everywhere to commemorate the anniversary, and I thought I might as well. Old fans of this publication might remember that I started to throw Proust Wakes when I discovered that he died on my birthday, as good a reason as any for a social event.

I might as well, also, because I am probably the only person in the world who owns a arty coffin prop and a support for the body of the life-sized dead Proust cake. The head, sculpted from marzipan or fondant, needed no support, because it rested on a lace-fringed white satin pillow. My friend Lauren Abrams built the support with fully fleshed legs, so only the trunk of the body and arms would be made of cake. We didn't need that many slices any more.

This fantastic picture of the 2013 life-sized dead Proust cake, by my photographer friend Tom Hilton, was so excellent that I used it for the invitation for the Wake of 2016. As you can see, the event went from a massive, thematically catered event to a potluck.

The 92<sup>nd</sup> Annual Wake for Marcel Proust  
 A Potluck Dinner  
 Saturday, November 19, 2016  
 9 p.m. until we're alone  
 Arrive at your leisure  
 This year, there will be no life-sized Dead Proust cake.  
 There will be a much smaller chocolate corpse/marzipan head.  
 Bring friends, food, drink, or any combination thereof.



Photo by Tom Hilton

I had quite the treasure of party props left from 2013 as well, like hundreds of Proust



matchbooks, hand-stamped with my collection of Proust stamps:



...And a jar full of bookmarks for all my reading guests, should they be short on them. The full text, missed in this quick photo I took, seconds before the guests started arriving, reads like this:

Marcel Proust

November 18, 1922

He wrote "The End" to his magnum opus and promptly died.



I also have a lifetime supply of wine labels from Bonny Doon Vineyards that have Proust's face on them. For every Proust Wake, regardless of what wine is served,

there will be a Proust label mounted over whatever label the vintner intended, red or white.

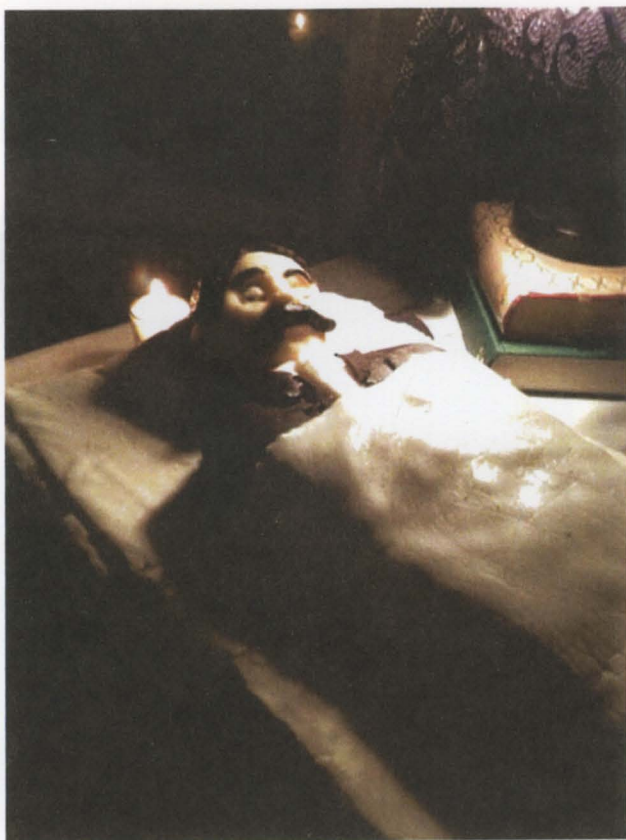


I wasn't even catering this party, so I didn't need to make cards for every Proustian dish, with the appropriate quote, for the buffet table. This was low-stress entertaining. Only one thing remained to do, make the much smaller, edible dead Proust.

Scale matters, in things like making cakes. A life-sized cake is literally no light undertaking, especially if you have any hope of fashioning a credible edible corpse out of things like flour. For somewhere around 40 guests, this was possible with a half sheet baking pan. For a body that was only about 18" long, a thick single layer cake was high enough to not need a support. For a life-sized corpse cake, it needs to rise at least a foot in the art coffin, and that, as you can imagine, is a whole lot of layers, if it's just cake.

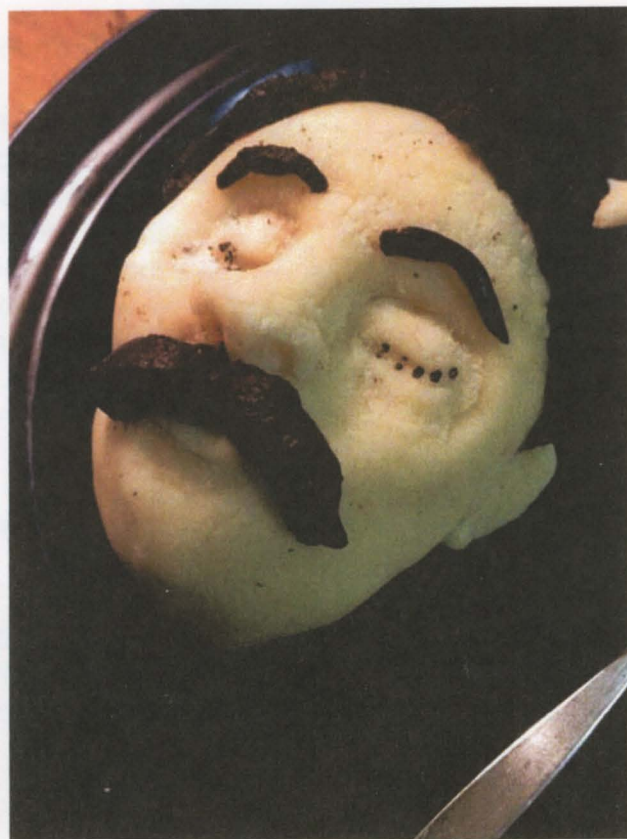
The smaller cake was a lot less effort to prepare, and perhaps because it was just fun, and not fun and hard work, the 2016 dead Proust cake was rather adorable.





I didn't even bother with visible arms and fondant hands, clasped together, holding a flower, as I had with all the life-sized cakes. It was a literal piece of cake, and I got to concentrate on the head. As always, the skin layer of Proust's head was made of fondant (or marzipan, other years). But Proust's brain is always full of fruits and nuts, as you can see.

At this moment in time, it seems likely that there won't be another Proust Wake until 2022, when fans will be commemorating the 100th anniversary of his death. Hopefully, by then, I will again have a huge party house to stage it in. You are most cordially invited.



*"Every death is for others a simplification of life."  
—Time Regained*



## **Food**

### **A Simple Sweet Thing: Strawberry Mousse**

Almost every issue of *Proust Said That* has ended with a Proustian recipe. And in these times, which leave many of us with an unpleasant taste in our mouths, there is a real need for some opposing sweetness to mitigate it. Unfortunately, these are not the times for devoting endless hours to extravagant productions like Nesselrode Pudding, as described in the first issue of PST. So in the interest of time, I have chosen a simple sweet that is nonetheless wonderful.

Strawberry mousse is the culinary opposite of the Nesselrode pudding. Instead of the Nesselrode's numerous ingredients, unlikely to be found in most people's pantries—chestnut paste, candied orange peel, etcetera—this dish calls for very few. And rather than taking days to make, this is a dessert you can literally whip up in minutes, when you find yourself contemplating a superb dinner for unexpected guests who are arriving in an hour.

Strawberry mousse is basically just a combination of whipped cream and strawberries. A food processor makes this felicitous combination instantly magnificent. It also offers a broad range of possibilities, like a light pink combination of fewer strawberries and more whipped cream, or a darker one of more strawberries and less cream. You can sweeten the cream to your liking, or not at all. You could add vanilla to the cream and make it a *crème chantilly*—or not. You can choose to fill the bottoms of the serving glasses with macerated



strawberries, if you like. You can run the strawberries through a strainer to take out the bits likely to get stuck in your teeth, or you can leave them in.

You can put the glasses filled with mousse in the freezer, if you have time, to give it a vaguely ice cream consistency, or serve it at room temperature. Make the servings larger or smaller, as you wish. Garnish the servings in the lovely manner of your choice. This recipe is basically foolproof, and in an age when our most venerable institutions are in danger of collapsing, a thing that promises to be foolproof is somehow deliciously comforting.



Here's my preferred method.

### Strawberry Mousse

2 cups of hulled strawberries  
1 cup whipping cream  
6 tablespoons powdered sugar  
1/2 tsp. vanilla

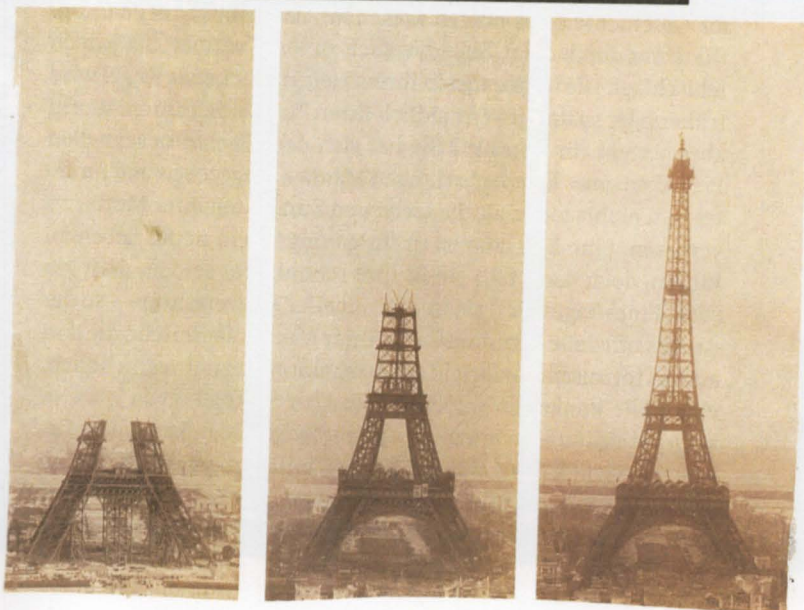
Wash the strawberries carefully, as they retain more pesticides than any other fruit. (Ideally, buy organic.) Remove the hulls and run them through a food processor until they're pulp, and strain out the seeds, if desired, by mashing them through a strainer. Whip the cream, add sugar and vanilla, and continue beating until it forms stiff peaks. Combine the mashed strawberries with the whipped cream, reserving enough cream for garnish.



***"What is this prettily colored thing we're eating?" asked Ski.***

***"It's called strawberry mousse," said Mme. Verdurin.***

***—Sodom and Gomorrah***



Marcel Proust  
Gesellschaft



IN MEMORIAM, ONCE AGAIN

THE ANNUAL WAKE  
FOR  
MARCEL PROUST

NOVEMBER 22, 2003, 10 PM

1907 GOLDEN GATE AVENUE  
SAN FRANCISCO



Black tie VERY optional

*"So manifold are our interests  
in life that it is not uncommon,  
on the self-same occasion, for  
the foundation of a happiness  
which does not yet exist to be  
laid down simultaneously with  
the aggravation of a grief from  
which we are still suffering."*

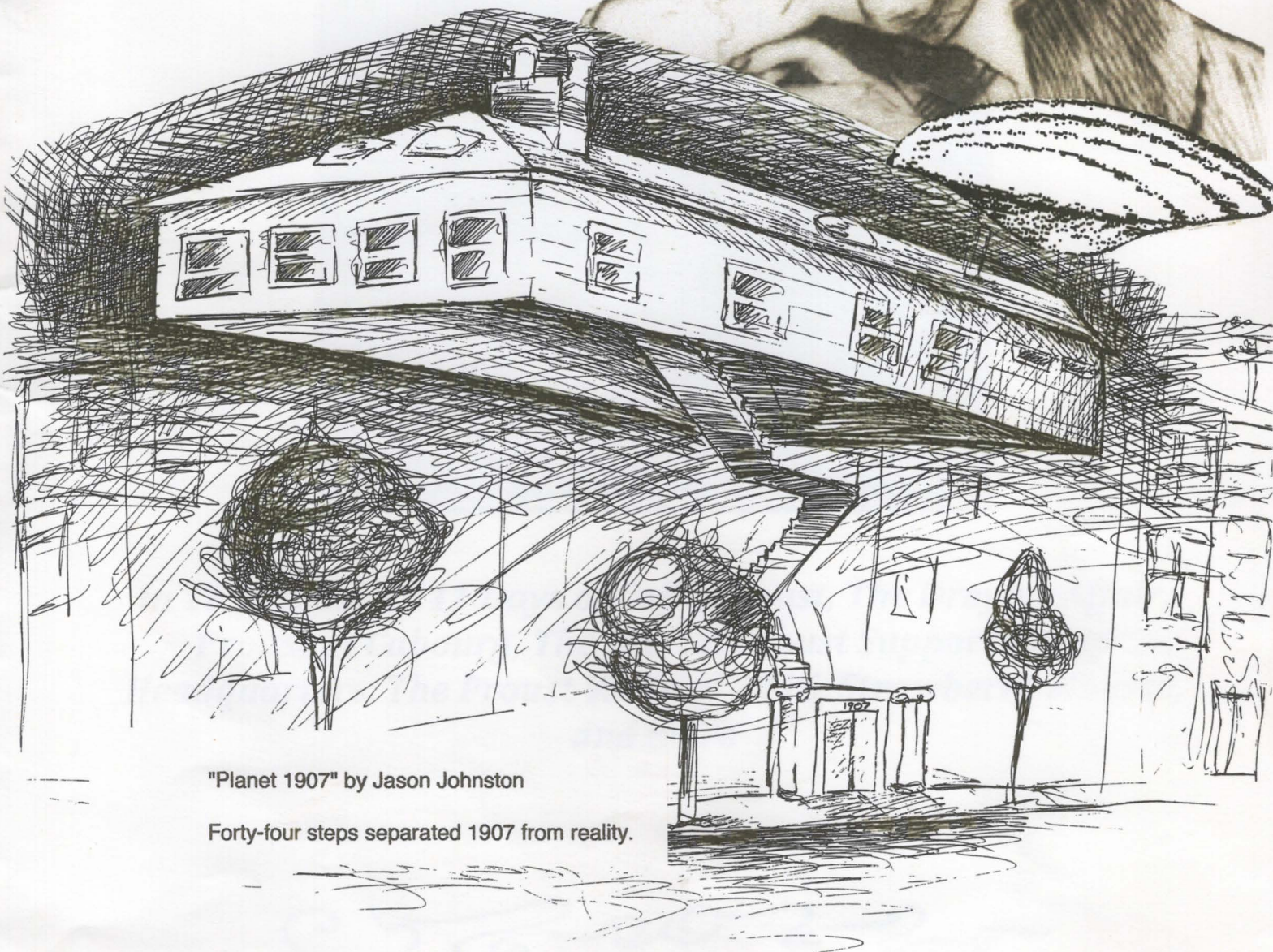
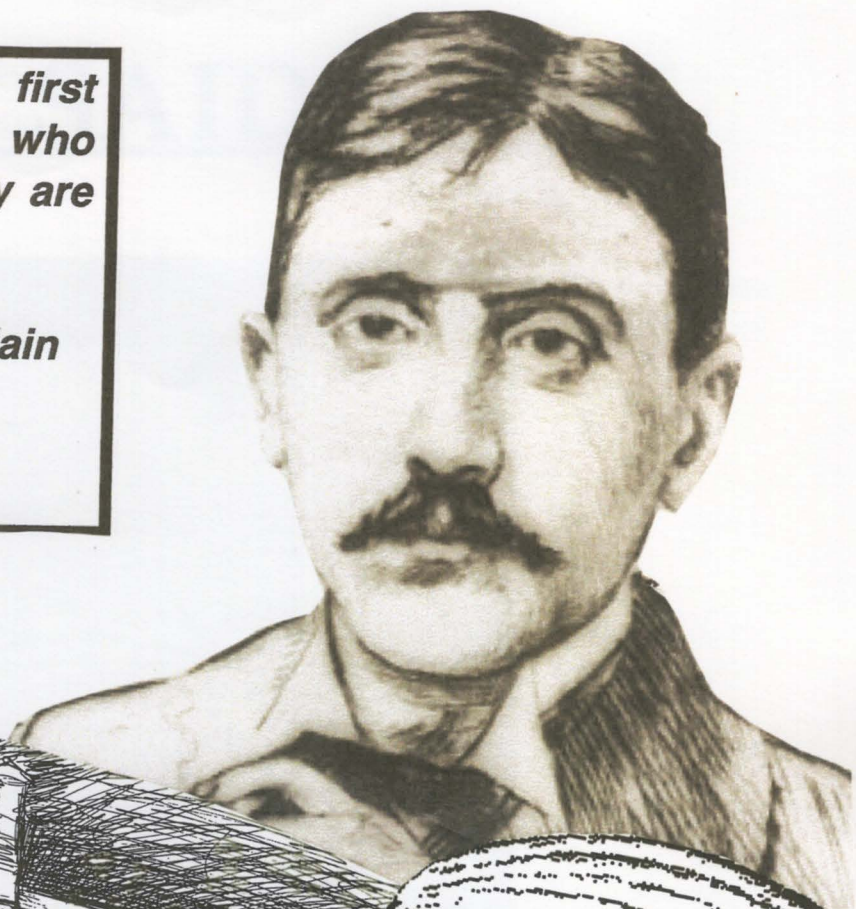
—Swann In Love





***"It was not for the first time that I felt that those who love and those who enjoy are not always the same."***

***—Cities of the Plain***



**"Planet 1907" by Jason Johnston**

**Forty-four steps separated 1907 from reality.**



