

We received this submission a while ago from a local writer calling himself Ahriman. It's a little outdated, but hell, so is punk rock, right? Out of respect for Paris and the hard working crew of bastards that made it happen, we'll proudly run it now.

- Johnny

## Paris, the Last Days

By Ahriman

It is the last days before the Occupation and a haze of smoke hangs over the cafe, mingling with the acrid taste of coffee and unease. About half the tables are filled. The patrons dress in black and nurse the ice at the bottom of their drinks, watching the street with a mix of trepidation and quiet resentment. In two days, the Paris Koffee Hauze will be closing its doors.

From the outside, it's easy to dismiss such boding melancholy. Paris is only one of the dozen coffee houses that litter Fort Collins. On summer nights gutter-punks camp out in the neighboring doorways, and in the winter the smoke inside is denser than fog. Property values in Old Town are at a premium, so there won't be any trouble filling the space. And with a new Starbucks within walking distance, there is little that the town fathers could miss.

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Paris the institution began as Paris on the Poudre, a derivative of a Denver coffee house and bookstore. The dirty uncle of Fort Collins coffee shops, Paris on the Poudre closed down when the owner started up a martini bar across the street, an ominous portent of things to come.

It was the mid-nineties and Colorado was in the midst of an economic boom. Old Town needed a face lift. Derelict buildings were scheduled for renovation, sculptures were moved into the plaza, and concert series were scheduled. The rush of new

money brought new tenants, and Old Town's haphazard collection of colors and classes was replaced with diversity-first bumper stickers and ethnic theme bars.

The jobless center went first, and the new police presence insured that those looking for work didn't hang around. The latino bar was next, making the plaza safe for white women looking to browse the art galleries and jewelry stores. And finally Paris.

In their places sprang vile simulacrum and precise mockeries. Walk toward where the jobless center was and you'll find a yoga center. In the place of the latino bar is a restaurant serving up rastafarian pasta. And where Paris used to be is a satellite police station.

A line was being drawn, and the Old Town planners were up on their rhetoric. Ushering in a store delivering third-world wares made under humane conditions, they declared that the color brown was only romantic when it was shipped across one or more oceans. And when bars became the only places open late, they made it clear that anyone under twenty-one wasn't welcome after dark. With the manic frequency of police patrols, no one disagreed too loudly.

Things were quiet for a year or two, until an ugly weed worked its way up through the freshly laid concrete. It wore its petals dyed purple and black and had a safety pin through its stem. Paris, now the Paris Koffee Hauze, was back.

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It's the day before Paris' closing night. Sandy is working the counter, but things are slow, so she cleans. The patrons talk softly amongst themselves, and self-conscious laughter has taken the place of the usual youthful posturing. The foreboding has grown so great it should be buying drinks.

Sandy is one third of Paris, her husband Zack another, and their child Solace rounds out the equation. Sandy has a smile for all her customers, accepting her role as mother to this motley tribe of goths, punks and misfits. Counselor and mediator, she listens to their teen dramas and laughs with self-abasement when pressed about her own life. Today she alternates optimism for the future with a weird sort of shell shock. Even ignoring the brace of tatoos that decorate both arms, you get the sense that this woman is a survivor.

Solace comes in from the street, dragging his father behind, and the couple trade duties, Sandy pouring love over Solace like rain from a good hard storm. Zack steps behind the bar and continues with the dishes.

If Paris were a televised police drama, Zack would be the bad cop. Six feet tall, give or take a mile, he doesn't give a damn if you come into his coffee house or buy his coffee, but the improvised club above the bar gives a fair impression of what he'd do if you threatened his family. A native of Fort Collins, he spent his youth sitting up all night in the 24-hour restaurants, putting piercings in the hard way. Now a father and business owner, he is an example of a punk trying to fight for his place in northern Colorado's city of dreams.

Frustrated but undeterred, Zack harbors plans for another business, this time a non-profit collective. Part coffee shop, part vegetarian/vegan restaurant, part music venue, he dreams of a place where people can work for food, perform their music and sell their art.

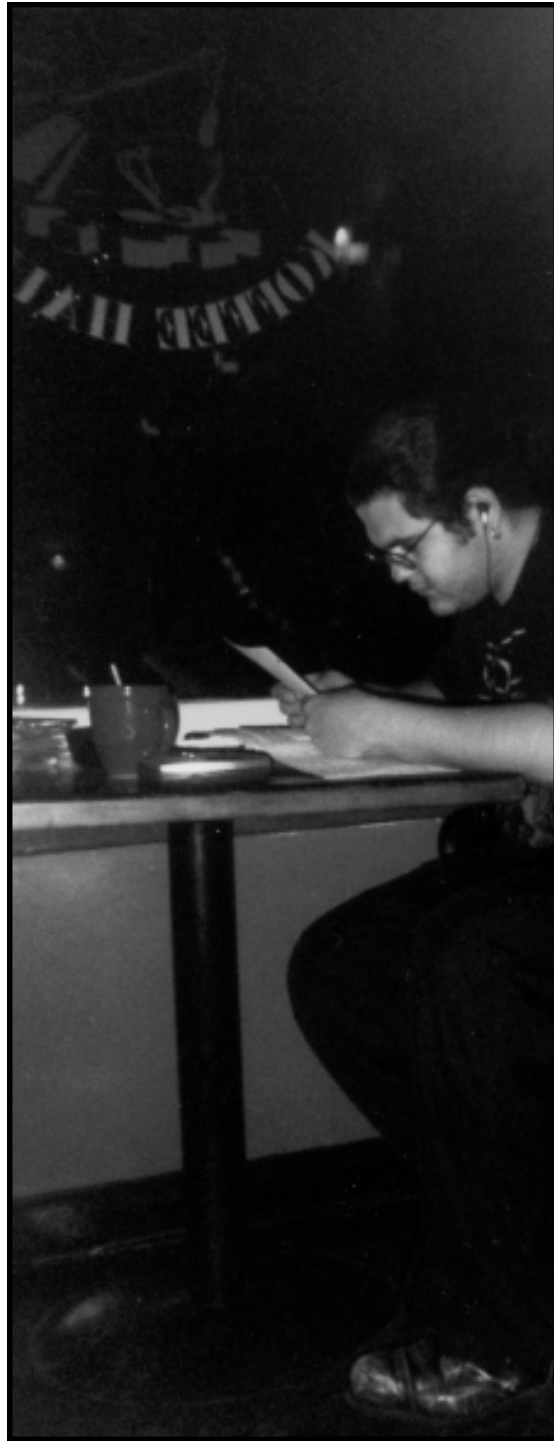
This is more than the bravado of an anti-hero. Before word came that their lease wasn't to be renewed, Paris had plans of expanding, opening up more floor space and offering a more diverse range of services. Even with limited space they already sold t-shirts printed at the local press, held art shows, ran a lending library, and opened up their floor Friday nights for local entertainment.

In the same breath Zack admits that Fort Collins doesn't have the culture to support this kind of dream. His plans stand in the wings, waiting for a community that can appreciate them.

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It is midnight, and the closing night crowd has spilled out onto the sidewalk in a celebration that is half party, half wake. Leather, black lace, and bared skin are the fabrics of choice. A storm passed through early in the afternoon, cooling the evening air, and now dry-lightening plays from cloud to cloud, sending up cheers from the crowd. The thunder is drowned out by the hammering music coming from inside. A pair of turn tables are set up just past the door and d.j.s take turns spinning records. The songs wind into one another, genres blurring into a chaotic wall of noise.

Everyone has turned out for the show. Aging,



overweight goths who haven't been seen for years pass clove cigarettes with the new guard, rail thin kids with factory-scuffed Doc Martins. A boy wearing a black boa flirts with a girl in a freshly shaven mohawk, and there is enough bondage gear between them to make the Marquis proud.

Behind the counter, Sandy throws up her hands in mock anger, shouting to the one regular barrista, "Josh, you're fired!"

Josh is an enigma. Not quite owner, but more than employee, he hovers in that liminal space occupied by itinerant alcoholic gunfighters and down-on-their-luck ronin. He was here, he did his job, and soon he'll be gone, but you get that nagging feeling that you'll be seeing him again.

"You can't fire me, I quit! This place won't last another day without me." Josh joins a group on the sidewalk and takes a seat, drink in hand.

The barristas fight to keep up with the demands for sugar-laden stimulants. The tip jar is overflowing with bills and fistfuls of coins, and there isn't even standing room in the house. For a perfect moment, Zack's dreams are coming true; every freak and misfit within a hundred miles is in attendance, packed shoulder to shoulder with the music, flesh and smoke. This is how Paris should have always been, this is the Paris they'll remember.

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Two a.m. comes quickly. The need for sleep has winnowed the ranks of the devoted, leaving those too old for a curfew but too young for the bars and clubs. Seats can be had for the asking and the coffee pots are all nearly empty.

Zack takes out the trash while Sandy collects the last of the dishes, hugging her children good night. Teenagers bristling with spikes and leather collect in small groups, exchanging back rubs and embraces.

Billy Idol, tamest of all pseudo-punks, wafts softly over the speakers. One of the girls sings along, another starts dancing, and finally it becomes apparent what is really being lost in the passing of this coffee house. There was never any meaningful rebellion here, no real social change ever fought its way out these doors. But it was a place where the kids could fashion themselves and their world away from the derision of an uncaring city. Here they could be tender to one another, here they had the freedom to be melodramatic, foolish, sexy and

irreverent, reveling in a few hours stolen from the monotony of soul-deadening high schools and minimum wage jobs. All for the price of a cup of coffee.

Zack sits down in back and lights up the last cigarette he'll smoke on Paris time. In a week Sandy will be delivering pizza, he'll be tattooing, and they will both be making more money than they did running Paris. Amongst the patrons there is talk of starting up a new Paris. Zack shakes his head every time. "Time to see what a cockroach this business really is."

Someone comments that every kid in the house worships him. For the first time that night you can see the exhaustion he carries with him, a weariness that has worked its way into his bones. "Maybe it will encourage them to go out and do something."

He finishes wiping down the tables, mops the floors, then he and his wife lock up for the last time.

A handful of kids refuse to leave. These are the ones who have rightfully earned the title of Parisites. They squat on the sidewalk holding vigil with cigarettes.

From the outside, it would be easy to dismiss their boding melancholy. But around the corner is the unlit storefront of Starbucks, with its pre-fab decor and empty walls, leaving one to wonder.

