“HELP ME IF YOU’RE IN PARIS. My couchsurfing host is creepier than anticipated. Contact me ASAP.”

That’s the facebook status I posted from a Bibliotheque Centre Pompidou computer while I hid, hyperventilating and soaking wet, from JuJu the Couchsurf Killer. I had no proof of his homicidal history, of course, but all signs pointed to at least a couple of unsuspecting foreign scalps in his freezer. While I frantically googled ‘cheap student hostels,’ I couldn’t help but wonder: how did my attempt to put judgments aside go so far awry?

I’ll be the first to admit that I take pleasure in judging people. I love a good assumption, and I’ll hold onto an unfavorable first impression for years at a time. It was this unhealthy affinity for assuming that led to my number one goal during my six months abroad: abstention from judgment. I figured that first impressions and stereotypes would keep me from understanding and appreciating new people and cultures, and sure enough, leaving my judgments on the other side of the Atlantic resulted in experiences I wouldn’t have had otherwise. Take all those lascivious-looking vieillards in Chambéry who implored me to sit down on park benches and chat, for example. If I had gone with my gut reaction, those crusty old men would have been told off in remedial French and never seen again. But because I withheld judgment (in broad daylight only, of course), I had several opportunities to improve my conversation skills in a low-stress, friendly setting.

I considered my no-judging goal a huge success—until Paris. The chronicle of JuJu the Couchsurf Killer began when I noticed the dollars dwindling in my bank account. Looking for a cheap way to travel, I came across Couchsurfing.com, an online community that connects
travelers. You can Couchsurf to find someone who’s just down for drinks and language practice, or to meet someone offering a free crashpad in Paris. The prospect of a sleepover with a complete stranger may seem sketchy at first, but, as friends assured me, the website is well-regulated and yields better-than-average experiences.

Leave it to me to screw up a good thing.

I messaged many Parisians, mostly women with some gay male couples thrown in. Or so I thought. One man, “JuJu,” messaged back a confirmation notice with contact information. In retrospect, I don’t know why I thought he was gay; the only traits truly evident from his profile were his tenuous grasp of English and a penchant for nonsensical emoticons. Overall, though, he seemed non-threatening, so I saw no reason to decline his offer.

Despite his positive reviews, one thing kept nagging at me: I couldn’t be sure what this JuJu character looked like based on his profile pictures. I narrowed it down to two suspects, a jew-froed twenty-something with a shy smirk, and...a forty-year-old Pakistani man with a Stalin ‘stache. Rather than suppress my preconceptions about middle-aged, mustachioed people, I chose to imagine how lovely my time would be with the slightly effeminate (and clean shaven) version of JuJu. Yet the moment I arrived at our rendezvous point outside the Musée d’Orsay, my illusions shattered.

I’d recognize that mustache from a kilometer away.

Things started to get weird when I dropped off my baggage in JuJu’s closet-sized apartment and was told that, due to space constraints, I could either sleep on the floor or on his
bed. As he began planning our day together, I interrupted, “I would prefer to explore Paris alone today,” yet he insisted upon walking me to my first destination. On our stroll to the Pompidou, he snapped approximately 20 photos of me per minute, stopping only to tell me how pretty I was and repeatedly ask whether or not I was ticklish. He then sealed the creeper deal by giving me a parting smackeroo on the forehead.

I used my alone time at the Pompidou to plan an escape. I told JuJu I’d meet him back at the Orsay at nine, but the pouring Paris rain made me miss this checkpoint. Around ten o’clock, I called him from a pay phone. He did not sound happy. “You have miss our rendezvous. I went out but I left for you the key. Don’t worry, kitten, I return immidiatement.”

I leaped out of the phone booth and sprinted in the direction of his apartment, thinking that if I beat him there, I could grab my suitcase and flee without having to recite my story about the old friend I met serendipitously on the streets of Paris. But—

I got lost.

Number 7 wasn’t where I was sure it was. In fact, buildings 5 and 9 sandwiched nothing but a couple of dumpsters, so I screamed “L’appartement n’existe pas!” into the stormy night sky. In answer, an angelic waiter came running out of a nearby café and gave me directions.

My time was running out. I bolted up the steep, creaky steps, certain that I would reach the 6th floor only to be mocked by a menacing, mustachioed grin and a brandished butcher knife. But the apartment was dark, the key under the doormat as promised. I snatched up my
luggage, squeezed into the elevator, and sliced through the rain, squinting for signs of a metro station.

Eventually, I shored up on the steps of a Montmartre hostel and slept in safety.

It’s strange—in the end, despite nearly being chopped to bits, I didn’t want to renounce my new, unassuming ways. Maybe I shouldn’t have shut off my creep radar in pursuit of an arbitrary goal, but who knows? Perhaps even my second and third impressions were wrong, and JuJu’s just a harmless dude with no social skills and camera. So, instead of lapsing back into my judgmental lifestyle, I have adopted a *nouveau* philosophy of discretion:

Don’t judge a book by its cover, but never hesitate to judge a man by his mustache. Especially if he asks you to sleep in his bed.