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An Apartment in Paris - Travel Stories

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AN APARTMENT IN PARIS – TRAVEL STORIES

A Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Colette O'Connor

December 2013

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Colette O'Connor

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AN APARTMENT IN PARIS – TRAVEL STORIES

by

Colette O'Connor

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
AND
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ABSTRACT

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by Colette O'Connor

This thesis is a first person narrative work of creative nonfiction. It is a series of travel essays, set frequently in Paris, that blend the elements of craft of the journalist, essayist, memoirist and humorist in stories designed to entertain, amuse and delight. Using an informal voice, conveying a lighthearted tone, the narrator tells of her travel adventures and discoveries in France, New Zealand and other destinations. Rich in those narrative elements that characterize the genre of travel writing, among them, memorable characters, vividly drawn settings, colorful dialogue, and a singular, personal point of view, these stories concern themselves, above all, with place. Each communicates to the reader a clear idea of the author's experience in, for example, Paris, or Sun Valley, and each brings alive the subject travel destination via the nonfiction narrative art of telling a compelling story. The theme of love links the stories of this collection, whether it is seen in the relationship among the narrator's family members, those who also participate in a number of these travel adventures, or the author's fondness for the places in which the adventures take place. Each chapter intends, on its own and as a part of the whole, to celebrate the fun and wonder of travel and to inspire readers to pack a bag and go – to wherever in the world their curiosity calls, whenever their sense of adventure beckons.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For My Parents

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PREFACE

It started, as these things do, without a lot of hoopla – my mother and I arriving at the Place de la Concorde during her first-ever trip to Paris. The day was brilliant, the sun glittered off the Seine, and our jet lag made us woozy with the city’s beauty. But then, to my surprise, my mother flung her arms out wide and let escape a sound loud enough for every Parisian within earshot to turn. “I’m baaaaack!” she cried, her joy bursting forth in a teary laugh. It was at that startling moment I became convinced that what she always had felt was true: In a previous life my mother was French and had lost her head to the guillotine – the deadly blade that once stood in that very spot.

First she lost her head; next she lost her heart. And then it followed: She found a tiny, ancient apartment in Paris’s stylish 16th arrondissement, and our family had ourselves not a mom but a *maman* – as well as a place in Paris. The apartment was no bigger than a bonbon. And after a renovation in which my mother painted it pretty pink and seagrass green – girly, California colors that scandalized the neighbors – it was no less sweet. The flat was a confection that gave our large family not only a mother whose essential French soul was home and happy after a lifetime lost, but also a new excuse for travel adventure. The apartment became a vacation, an escape, and a place where each of us – all of us – would lose ourselves, find one another and otherwise connect with life on a larger, more exciting, *more Parisian* stage. We two brothers, three sisters, assorted children, Dad, and, of course, newly French *maman* now had Paris to discover, and the City of Light did indeed dazzle us. Especially this daughter.

An Apartment in Paris – Travel Stories is a literary telling of this, among other, adventures. A collection of short, self-contained essays in the “travel writing” genre, this creative nonfiction work is, in the way of travel narrative, an exploration of place. What is meant by “place?” Don George in *Travel Writing*, a guide to the art and craft of the form, explains:

What makes a successful travel story? In one word it is *place*. Successful travel stories bring a place to life through a combination of factual and vividly rendered descriptive details and anecdotes, characters and dialogue. Such stories transport the reader and convey a rich sense of the author’s experience in that place. The best travel stories set the destination and experience in some larger context, creating rings of resonance in the reader. (65)

Whether Paris, New Zealand, Mount Shasta or Sun Valley, the settings in which I – writer, reporter, memoirist, explorer – find myself are in these pages brought to life via the elements essential to the travel writer’s art. These are the same considerations of craft at the heart of creative nonfiction – concerns of voice, tone, setting, memory, point of view, accurate fact-gathering and, of course, effective storytelling. As is often a given in creative nonfiction, the stories of *An Apartment in Paris* reflect a *mélange* of genres: the news or feature article of journalism, the first-person or personal essay, the memoir, and the humor sketch. Designed according to the mandate that the best travel stories are “shaped like a good short story, with a clear beginning, middle and end” (George 65), they are rich in sharp reportage, illustrative anecdotes, compelling characters, colorful conversations, and plenty of personal recollections. Taken together these stories of place share a common theme – love. They express a singular voice – mine. And they are styled to entertain, amuse, and charm. Leaving behind those nonfiction narratives that are overly serious or cerebral, these lighthearted travel tales tell of adventures in Paris

and elsewhere that are layered with the sort of personal experiences that may well resonate with readers.

In “Bruno in the Afternoon,” for instance, my sister Candice is mugged in the Paris Métro and, in a fever of infatuation, elopes with the police inspector assigned to her case. This cautionary tale illustrates for any woman who dreams of acquiring a French lover how she might re-think her notions of romance. His drink? Pernod. His smoke? Gauloise. And his car? Peugeot. Still, Inspector Bruno’s most *curious* passion is passion. This is a love story that well reveals how a place – Paris – informs a character – Bruno – who drives a narrative vivid with the pleasures, perils and perplexities found in France and the French.

Similarly, the experience of disbelieving even the idea of an adored parent’s aging may be common among many devoted daughters, as is illustrated by the ski weekend chronicled in “Sun Valley With Dad.” And possibly universally understood, if not met with dread, is the disaster of a dinner party planned to impress a particularly unimpressible future mother-in-law, as is described in “Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner Never Again?” This travel tale tells of the evening Madame P., a true *enfant terrible* with French cuisine, meets her horror of an American menu whose featured delicacies include Cheez-Its and puce-colored Kool-Aid.

Whether armchair or actual wanderer, vagabond, explorer, or adventurer, any reader infected by what early travel writer Mark Twain called “the virus of restlessness” (Twain 3) may find, in this collection, examples true to the literary form, that is to say, “stories that capture the spirit of [a] place – the *genius loci* – and provide important

context and perspective.” (George 58). In “A Miracle for Pierre,” for example, my brother George rescues a doomed Wirehaired Fox Terrier puppy from a gritty pet shop on a quai by the Seine and illustrates one very special, if miraculous, relationship. “Not Surfing New Zealand,” the story of a surfing “safari” I risked with my then-stranger of a boyfriend, reveals not only how the arrival of True Love is quite like a ride on the perfect wave, an elusive gift that lies just beyond the next beach, or the next, but also the glory that is gorgeous, ever magical, New Zealand. As something of its setting is described:

Come dawn and now miles from Auckland, the scenery is heart stopping. Volcanic, wind-swept, desolate. Here in New Zealand the descriptive “pristine” isn’t kidding. Wild, clean and everywhere, the sea, each twist in the road reveals a vista of startling beauty.... We speed north along the Whangaparaoa Peninsula, Michael and I, and screech up to a beach our guidebook calls Pikiri. I am speechless at the spectacle. It is an arc of flawless white sand fringed in ferns and flowers. It unfurls, I swear, for forever at the edge of a dazzling aqua-green bay. We are completely alone but for a far-off fisherman, who bobs in his boat beyond the frothing breakers.

“We go to literature – and perhaps especially to creative nonfiction – to learn not about the author, but about ourselves; we want to be *moved* in some way,” it is said in *Tell It Slant*, a book on writing and shaping creative nonfiction. “That emotional resonance happens only through skillful use of artistic techniques” (xiii). These techniques enliven *An Apartment in Paris*. They are blended from the journalist’s favored plaything – all that is factually, accurately, true – and the fiction writer’s most cherished treasure of the toolbox: storytelling that, as art, “is a lie that makes us realize the truth” (LaPlante 26). With the essayist’s singular point of view, the memoirist’s reliance on memory, the humorist’s frolicsome tone, and the storyteller’s effort to craft tales that charm and engage, this collection of travel stories aims to inspire any reader

with a desire to wander – and wonder – to pack a bag and go. For wherever in the world one’s restlessness leads, whatever nearby city, far-away land, or beckoning adventure calls, to follow one’s heart when it wants to travel is to return home, eventually, with stories that simply cannot wait to be told. The tales of *An Apartment in Paris*, this collection, prove so.

Literary Influences

Mark Twain in 1869 was among the first to invent the travel narrative with *The Innocents Abroad*, a humorous take on his “great pleasure excursion” through Europe and the Holy Land. Today, gauging by the “travel essay” or “travel literature” shelves of bookstores, Twain’s pioneering effort is joined by possibly “trillions of books about France,” in the words of Diane Johnson, author of *Three Found in Fiction* (*L’Affaire, Le Mariage, Le Divorce*). Because a majority of stories in *An Apartment in Paris* are set in the City of Light, a number of these “trillions” are of particular influence to the collection. Added to them are works of the masters, like Twain, who perfect the first-person, nonfiction narrative form as applied to travel. There is John Steinbeck, who in 1961 entered the genre with *Travels With Charley*, a chronicle of his cross-country adventure in the company of the Paris-born, “old French gentleman poodle” named Charles le Chien (but going by Charley). Charley is a traveling companion who, Steinbeck is proud to point out, “responds quickly only to commands in French. Otherwise, he has to translate and that slows him down” (Steinbeck 9). There is also Peter Mayle, whose *A Year in Provence* is peopled by characters equally unique. For

instance, Mayle introduces a restaurant proprietor, dressed in velvet smoking jacket and bow tie, whose mustache, “sleek with pomade, quivered with enthusiasm as he rhapsodized over the menu....It was a gastronomic aria he performed at each table, kissing the tips of his fingers so often that he must have blistered his lips” (Mayle 3).

These and other authors of travel narratives, these contributors to the literature of place, explore the form in memoir, travelogue, essay, the nonfiction novel, or by crafting short humor sketches. Each a treasure of elements that exemplify “a wonderful travel story” (George 65).

Tim Cahill’s essay collection *Hold the Enlightenment*, for example, blends the crack reporting of the journalist with the story skills of the fiction writer, the voice and point of the view of the humorist, and the personal commentary of the essayist. This convergence of forms results in a narrative that is fresh, original, and an excellent example of the mandate that, “as a good travel writer, you must both “pay attention the details of place – in all their glorious peculiarities...and [also] render these details in a voice that is wholly your own” (Miller and Paola 33).

“I am not a yoga kinda guy” (Cahill 3), Cahill writes in the title story, describing a yoga retreat in Jamaica where he ultimately decides to postpone enlightenment – at least until he can lose weight and acquire a more bendy body. In “The Teeming Ark,” Cahill’s rollicking recollection of his adventure aboard a “great throbbing riverboat motoring down the Congo River” in the company of 3,000 Congolese Bantu, pygmies and chimpanzees (94), he introduces memorable characters like the fellow passenger named God. Cahill reports God saying many wild and wonderful things by way of dialogue; he

places God in a setting – the Ark – that is described using all the color afforded a writer adept at the use of sparkling imagery, witty wordplay and descriptive, sensory details as clear and strong as Cahill, one week into his journey, finds the scent aboard the *Fleuve Congo*, which has no bathing facilities.

Cahill is a travel “adventure” writer in the vein of Jon Krakauer, whose *Into Thin Air* is a gripping account of a doomed ascent up Mt. Everest, and Bill Bryson, who, in *A Walk in the Woods*, narrates with hilarity the tale of his ill-fated attempt to hike the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail. In *An Apartment in Paris*, several adventure-themed stories are inspired by this brand of travel narrative, the best examples of which hold to the tenet that successful, compelling travel essays, like the best creative nonfiction, “read almost like short stories” (Miller and Paola 94). “Submitting to Shasta,” for example, is an account of an ill-advised mountaineering expedition undertaken by non-mountaineers who, by the grace of some force extraordinary, survive. Attempts to emulate the drama, suspense and narrative arc at work in the nonfiction adventures so creatively captured by Cahill characterize the tale.

The art of essayist M.F.K. Fisher that so dazzles in her 744-page *The Art of Eating*, and that of journalist and nonfiction novelist Susan Orlean in her travel-essay collection, *My Kind of Place*, also greatly inspire the stories of *An Apartment in Paris*. Fisher, a consummate cook and *gourmande*, pens essays on France and food and love and life and appetite. She writes in *The Art of Eating*: “When I write about hunger I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth, and the love of it...and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied (xvi).”

Orlean, a “woman who’s been everywhere,” as the subtitle to *My Kind of Place* declares, crafts essays devoted to topics as curious as the tale of Keiko the whale, who after 20 years of captivity in a sad, run-down Mexican aquarium, is released into a migrating ocean pod, and follows his fellow cetaceans “where they headed off past Lovey Bank, past the Faeroe Islands, onward to – well, who knows? Whales keep their own counsel” (Orlean 258).

Both Fisher and Orlean perfect the essayist’s craft of creating short pieces that are small jewels of vivid details, dialogue, anecdote, personal commentary, even philosophizing. Fisher writes:

It is, though, very dull to be at table with dull people, no matter what their sex. Dining partners, regardless of gender, social standing, or the years they’ve lived, should be chosen for their ability to eat – and drink!...Then with good friends of such attributes, and good food on the board, and good wine in the pitcher, we may well ask, When shall we live if not now? (44)

What’s more, these essayists combine the journalist’s keen concern for accurate facts, accurately conveyed, with the fiction writer’s skill at telling a compelling story via fiction’s favored devices – among them, a writing style that is rich in clever turns of phrase, unexpected twists of language, imagery as vivid as a photograph, settings alive with colorful descriptions, and dialogue that veritably leaps off the page. Both perfect the task essential to travel writing, indeed, to all of creative nonfiction, that is, “that, really, *everything* is ultimately about character: showing and telling, dialogue, plot, concrete details...everything revolves around strong and compelling characters” (LaPlante 418).

The essays of Fisher and Orlean are made lively by people such as Orlean’s “Hervé Halfton, a French person who hates French people” (Orlean 137) and Fisher’s

garrulous *grandpapa* Papazi, who year after year “produced his weekly triumph of a tart as big as a cartwheel, with all the apple slices lying back to belly to back in whorls and swoops” (Fisher 420). Their essays also are lavishly laced with those “glorious peculiarities” of setting or anecdote that make for a rousing and memorable travel narrative, a narrative that “interests and engages the reader” (George 65), as well as reminds him or her of why, in the end, one travels. Says travel writer Pico Iyer:

We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next, to find ourselves. We travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world.... And we travel, in essence, to become young fools again – to slow time down and get taken in, and fall in love once more (Miller and Paola 32).

As Orlean writes of such peculiarities in “Where’s Willy?” the story of Keiko the whale: “It was a hell of a time to be in Iceland, although by most accounts it’s always a hell of a time to be in Iceland, where the wind never huffs and puffs but simply blows your house down” (Orlean 257).

In addition to the travel-adventure writing and travel-essay writing that informs *An Apartment in Paris*, there is the travel memoir. Among those notable for their one-of-a-kind voice and singular point of view – a given of the genre – is *My Life In France* by Julia Child. Child’s affection for France and quirky observations enliven her recollection of the years 1948 through 1954 when she and her husband, Paul, lived in Paris, Marseille and Provence. The memoir is a series of linked autobiographical essays that mark, says Child in her Introduction, “a crucial period of transformation in which I found my true calling, experienced an awakening of the senses, and had such fun I hardly stopped moving long enough to catch my breath” (Child 3). Because the memoir is, in the author’s words, “a book about some of the things I have loved most in my life: my

husband Paul, *la belle* France, and the many pleasures of cooking and eating” (3), love infuses the narrative in all manner of expression: as the warmth and intimacy of Julia Child’s voice; in the relationship between the book’s main characters; and, especially, in the writer’s affectionate perceptions of everything from the first meal in France that left her in a swoon, to the Paris she worships. Returning to the City of Light after a weekend in England, she writes: “I wept with relief and pleasure. Oh, how I *adored* sweet and natural France, with its human warmth, wonderful smells, graciousness, coziness and freedom of spirit!” (82) Her description of that infamous meal is no less enthusiastic: “*Portugaises* (oysters), *sole meunière*, *salade verte*, *fromage blanc* and *café filtré*. Ah me!” (111)

The author’s voice in this memoir is warm, witty, intimate and entirely her own. Her likeability is immense. Her very personal observations of France, the French and all things foreign are infused with her particular – and unique – personality. It is her voice that goes far in conveying “a rich sense of [this] author’s experience” in France (George 65). Also well expressing the hallmark of compelling travel writing is Child’s literary skill at turning memories into memoir, that is to say, into a narrative that, “unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, narrows the lens, focusing on a time in one’s life that was unusually vivid” (Miller and Paola 96). “*Remember what it was to be me,*” said essayist/journalist/memoirist Joan Didion about the role memory plays in crafting effective creative nonfiction, “that is always the point” (LaPlante 43).

Consider Twain's experience in *The Innocents Abroad*, the European and Holy Land pleasure excursion he describes as "a picnic on a gigantic scale" (Twain 3) that ends as something of a relief. "I suppose we only stopped at the Bermudas because they were on the programme," he writes. "We did not care anything about any place at all. We wanted to go home" (488). And consider Steinbeck's in *Travels With Charley*:

I know that sooner or later I would have to have a go at Texas, and I dreaded it. I could have bypassed Texas about as easily as a space traveler can avoid the Milky Way. It sticks the big old Panhandle up north and it slops and slouches along the Rio Grande. Once you are in Texas, it seems to take forever to get out and some people never make it. Let me say in the beginning that even if I wanted to avoid Texas I could not, for I am wived in Texas and mother-in-lawed and uncled and aunted within an inch of my life (227).

These literary voices are each as unique as the travel adventures undertaken and the memories recounted in highly personal stories. This is essential to the art of travel writing because, in literature of place, "[a]s with any good creative nonfiction, the *self* must be wholly present in the work. A voice that engages us to take this trip along with you [the writer], to stand at the windows and gaze out at what you, *and only you*, choose to show us [the reader]" (Miller and Paola 35). Whether it is *A Town Like Paris* by Bryce Corbett, the story of an expatriate Australian who romances and marries a Lido showgirl, or *On Rue Tatin* by Susan Loomis, the chronicle of American who opens a cooking school in France "to prove that each and every dream CAN come true" (Loomis vii), the author's experience – and voice – are unlike any other. In *An Apartment in Paris*, the author's voice and experience are, as well.

Finally, David Sedaris, with *Me Talk Pretty One Day* offers short, sharp and seriously funny essays that are "the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life and

the artistic expression thereof” (Miller and Paola 101). The literary humor of Sedaris’s Paris-set travel sketches inspires the stories of *An Apartment in Paris* to go for the laugh, or, failing that, at least remain lighthearted in tone and mindful that, in travel writing, one of the biggest author’s faux pas is “not having a fresh voice or a sense of humor” (George 59). Sedaris is said to be “our generation’s James Thurber, Dorothy Parker, Fran Lebowitz, Woody Allen and Mark Twain wrapped in a compact package with a pixie’s voice,” according to one critic. The title vignette of *Me Talk Pretty One Day* is a sketch of the humorist’s experience as a student in a Paris French class. The teacher is a belittling “saucebox,” and Sedaris and his classmates of every nationality are immersed in new and undeserved “occasions for shame.” If “the juxtaposition of odd or unexpected things makes up a lot of what we find comic” (101), then *Me Talk Pretty One Day* is a transcendent instance of travel writing that, like Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad*, shines with literary hilarity. “Sometime me cry alone at night,” Sedaris writes (Sedaris 172), and surely any student of French who has suffered and barely survived a similar ordeal enjoys the “rings of resonance” (George 65) that make for travel stories that, like those of *An Apartment in Paris*, celebrate the fun and wonder of travel, ever with the emphasis on fun.

This story collection, this literature of place, is formed from the journalist’s fact-rich reportage, the essayist’s autobiographical style, the memoirist’s reliance on memory, and the humorist’s frolicsome voice. It is, in a word, travel writing.

PART ONE: PARIS

THE MAKING OF MY MAMAN

It started, as these things do, without a lot of hoopla – my mother and I arriving at the Place de la Concorde during her first-ever trip to Paris. The day was brilliant, the sun glittered off the Seine, and our jet lag made us woozy with the city’s beauty. But then, to my surprise, my mother flung her arms out wide and let escape a sound loud enough for every Parisian within earshot to turn. “I’m baaaaack!” she cried, her joy bursting forth in a teary laugh. It was at that startling moment I became convinced that what she always had felt was true: in a previous life my mother was French and had lost her head to the guillotine – the deadly blade that once stood in that very spot.

Now, she has lost her head in a different fashion. Or maybe it’s her heart. At 70-something, this mother of five, grandmother to seven and lifelong Francophile is cashing in her fantasy and becoming a French *madame*.

Who knew she had it in her, this utter oneness with a buttered baguette for breakfast (it used to be plain toast), this bliss while browsing Monoprix, this absolutely transcendent expression she gets when she says to the pear man at the market in something that’s actually French, “*deux belles poires, s’il vous plait, Monsieur.*” My mom. Now she is my *maman*.

She has learned to tie a scarf, become a connoisseur of lemon tarts. And to see her charming them in the stalls of Saturday’s *marché aux puces* at the Porte de Vanves is to see my mom – excuse me, my *maman* – inhabiting a character I suppose has been there all along. Maybe it just was hidden within the harried housewife of classic California

suburbia, the French-themed person that lurked beneath the surface of the well-to-do, stay-at-home mom possessed of passions, apparently, far beyond the obvious: beautifully prepared meals and a house that, thanks to her own mastery of a mop and certain vavavoom with a vacuum, tilted toward the immaculate.

I don't know, maybe there were hints. How her garden behind our modest wood-shingled house had to have precisely pruned rows of shapely, pointy things, gravel paths and a fountain – a formal style I later would learn channeled Versailles. How she said “lingerie” unlike anyone else's mom, or even store clerks or TV – pronouncing it the authentic French way (*lahn-je-ree*) even though she never had been to France, much less learned a word of French or even met an actual French person. These were things, she said, she “just felt.” And it is not like translated French books and romantic French films fed her imagination. From the day she met my Army officer-turned-stockbroker dad on a blind date, married him two weeks later and gave birth to babies one, two, three, four and, after a brief timeout, five, her life was an all-consuming whirl of wifedom, children and housework. Even if she *had* had the slightest second to herself to study a foreign language or culture, she would have used it first to collapse, exhausted.

“Endless drudgery,” she called it all. But we knew underneath the sometime whining she loved it (didn't she?). Home and family, after all, were her pride of accomplishment.

So today when my *maman*, who keeps a tiny, pink apartment in Paris's chi-chi 16th arrondissement, doesn't just say, but *wears* sexy French lingerie, I wonder how she was born one person – my mom – only to become another: this mom-object of such

major admiration (in me) that I would be beyond thrilled if I could be even a tenth as fabulous as she. How can becoming a French *madame* do that?

Well, anyway, this is what happened. First there was the espadrilles and boat-neck, striped T-shirt thing. Maybe it was how Jackie Kennedy always was photographed in St. Tropez wearing the fetching, oh-so-French summer outfit (with white jeans), but my mom (who *loves* Jackie Kennedy, don't we all?) wore espadrilles coming and boat-neck, striped T-shirts going, even if it was only to the grocery store. Then there was the coq au vin. Maybe it was how Julia Child in TV cooking class would reminisce of her days at the Cordon Bleu while slapping around her chicken breasts, but my mom (who *loves* Julia Child, don't we all?) started revising our meals. Coq au vin, remoulade, vichyssoise, tapenade: Not overnight but slowly, as surely as the Tour Eiffel lights the Paris night with romance, even magic, family dinners required a French accent to describe.

By the time in her 50s she finally, *finally* put down the Hoover long enough to take her first trip to France, it was pretty much over. My mom was quite far gone as my *maman*.

She could claim with pride a small, remaining shred of dignity (*trés* small) after being worked over for years by the terrifying Mme. Bliss, the adult-school French teacher who was none too impressed with my mom's...well, let's just say *issues* with the *imparfait* (for one). She now routinely was going by Jacqueline, her French given name, instead of Gadgie, her father's nonsensical childhood nickname for her – which my mom would use, but never my *maman*. She had our foyer, sunroom and bathroom floors all

rehabbed in black and white tile (*see*, Malmaison), named our wire-haired fox terrier Pierre, and never, *ever*, even if she were flat out postal with hunger, eat so much as a bite between meals. Of course, a French *madame* is like that: Emerging from the boulangerie she might bite off the butt end of her baguette before lunch or dinner to avoid a faint, but dive into a sack of Cheetos? *Horreur!* I would learn things like that later, of course, after my mom was well into her *mamanization*.

So after her first trip to Paris and the *I've lived before, but I was French!* incident at the Place de la Concorde, my mom could not get enough of it. Like she was picking up the misplaced bits of a soul that long ago had shattered and was scattered by the winds of time; like she was ecstatically sticking each one back in place until her essence again was shining, happy, whole. She did a trip of French cathedrals, another of museums, a third of spas – Vittel to Evian. There was the chateaux tour, the art trek, the ancient villages drive-by event. If she didn't pray to the Virgin at Lourdes (she did), she was buying a bikini in Biarritz that was oh-so-Brigitte Bardot. If she wasn't getting teary at the beaches of Normandy (she was), she was flipping over the faience of Quimper, lost in downtown Dijon, or found to have friends in Provence.

Over the years each trip would leave my mom a little more *maman*-like. Her hair, for instance. My mom's graying brunette bob that in the youth-obsessed U.S. was dyed (to its eternal shame) a shade not found in nature became in my *maman* a glossy bob of silvery pride, its *au natural* hue (as encouraged by her Paris hair people) a halo of honor for her ageless grace. Her shoes went down a heel height – the better to speedwalk Paris cobblestones – her handbags up in quality, and her closet....why, if my mom were

to get a load of her closet, practically bare but for a few – a very few – exquisitely tailored things, she would wail *I have nothing to wear!* But not my *maman*. *She* finds her dribs and drabs of outfit take her from day to hot date with my dad (I don't want to know about it) in something that before her Frenchification my mom tried for years sans success: total chic.

Weird, no? Or as my *maman* would say, *non?*

And it's not like my mom's transformation is limited to such frippery as style. No, the more and more my *maman* emerged after mastering the many mom-challenges of life in France – the art of just saying yes! to rich French pastries daily without packing on pounds, say, or the science of shampooing, leg shaving, et al. with a shower nozzle that has an agenda of its own – the more I was convinced: I am the daughter of a *madame*! A *madame* almost as authentic as if once upon a time in another life she had been ruled by a Louis or two. Or has she? Who else holds family as the *raison d'être* of a happy life, and has made long French-style Sunday lunches a weekly ritual? Who else infuses grace in moments, charm in hours and meaning in years of loving and generous efforts on behalf of those she loves – never forgetting that nothing says love like a perfectly made *tarte aux pommes*? My *maman*, that's who.

Oh, my mom could navigate her 70s convinced it's time to slow down, stick close to home, be content to look back – a lot – at a fruitful life best enjoyed these days through the adventures of her grandchildren. Well...no. My *maman* will have none of it. Racking up Air France miles, she is – jetting between San Francisco and Paris with a vengeance bred of the overwhelming need I'm guessing she lost at the guillotine: that is,

to fly along rue de Passy in the rain on her way to the Métro, her shoes French flat, her handbag French-fine, and her part-French heart totally at home.

We miss her when she's there, of course. But knowing my *maman*, with dad, is snug in her itty-bitsy Paris pied-a-terre, which vacation schedules permitting we always are invited to share, is to thrill to my mom knowing a happiness – no, a *bliss* – that I hope one day to find for myself.

The day I was born, long before she became my *maman*, my mom named me Colette. I should have seen it coming.

AN APARTMENT IN PARIS

One of the benefits of having your mom become your *maman* is that, eventually, she wants to shop. For a Paris apartment. Sure, she could have kept her California home a faux French abode, complete with a sparkly Eiffel Tower (lamp) in the living room. But owning an actual flat in the *trés* chic Right Bank neighborhood of Passy was an obsession too seductive for my mother to pass up. It would be wildly impractical, impossible to pay for, out of the question to visit more than a few months each year. She had to have it. A place in the City of Light would put her there in the thick of all the inconveniences that pained actual French people: The lack of air conditioning in summer's sweltering heat. The freezing water of winter that bursts the bathroom pipes. And, of course, the *frigo* so small only a few items at a time may be refrigerated – six eggs, max, a half-round of cheese, or a nibble of salad greens. The apartment would be a bitty pied-à-terre that required the services of, hopefully, handsome French handymen and, no doubt, hunky French plumbers. They would fix said inconveniences at great expense and with a maximum of hassle – and all this happening in a foreign language! Well, this would immerse my mom in a joy – a *joie* – far beyond any she had known in this life. Given her previous life as an actual French person (a fact as far as we, her family, were concerned), its unfortunate loss at the guillotine during the French Revolution certainly would be vindicated by my *maman*'s return to Paris not as a passing-through tourist, but instead as a recurring resident. With her own address no less! The very thought of it thrilled her.

So she warmed up her high school French. “*Bonjour*,” she routinely greeted us, sure to put a happy trill in her tone like a true *Parisienne*. “*Je m’appelle Jacqueline* – that’s Jacq-*leen*,” she practiced. “Can you believe, *c’est moi* who now lives in Paris!” Next, she placed a call to Catherine the realtor, a Frenchwoman based in San Francisco who specialized in finding homes in France for Americans completely clueless about foreign business transactions.

Amped by excitement, my *maman* asked Catherine: “A quiet apartment in the heart of Passy, is it possible?” Catherine was a peppy yet practical woman who, when in Paris, sped around on a red Renault motorbike and treated her American clients like the children they became when faced with matters entirely too French for them. She was eager to please.

“Of course,” she said, “why not?” Did Madame have an idea of what she wanted?

“Authentic,” Mom said. “My place has to be very Paris.”

“Of course,” said Catherine. Little did she guess the length and depth and breadth of my mother’s impossibility to please. Zipping around on her red Renault, the realtor acquired a fat portfolio of possible Passy apartments and, in the space of a week, insisted Mom fly to Paris to choose among them. They were beautiful apartments, grand apartments, apartments fit for the most finicky of actually French *mesdames*. But my *maman* would have none of them.

“The apartment for me, well, it has to say, *Paris*,” Mom said during a tour of the ninth or tenth.

“*Alors, Madame, zis is in Paris,*” said Catherine. Her mommy tone was firm. The two were standing in the *salon* of a glass-wall flat on rue Raynouard. Mom regarded the clean, cool stainless steel wedges and Lucite edges of the futuristic apartment that Catherine just as coolly lead her through. My mother regarded the current owner’s TV table shaped into a shapely set of women’s legs and flashed a frown. Where were the walls of gilded plasterwork frou-frou? The floors of ancient parquet? Where was the itsy-bitsy bathtub with its hand-held shower nozzle? Why, my mother thought, one is simply not in Paris if one doesn’t walk on floors so worn by generations of Parisians that they moan and groan like the crotchety aged they are. And one is not a true Parisian if, while squeezed in a bathtub sized for a toddler, one doesn’t sit folded into thirds, and attempt to control a hand-held shower hose with a wild, unwieldy life of its own.

“Yes, I know it’s in Paris” said Mom, “but...no.” She rejected the handsome flat full of mirrors with its disco ball chandelier on the boulevard Beausejour. She nixed the nice Le Corbusier-inspired two-bedroom on rue Nicolo that had white tubular railings throughout, like an ocean liner. And she practically went running from the top-floor studio with a Seine river view that was fashioned from industrial gewgaws. It appeared the up-to-date kitchens, renovated baths and Art Moderne bedrooms with Paris rooftop views that Catherine favored held zero romance for my *maman*. To serve as my mother’s apartment a place had to possess...

“Well, what?” Catherine outright asked after presenting yet another lovely pied-à-terre on rue de Passy itself. There, my mother was turned off by the salon that had no pre-Revolutionary fireplace, the highly stylish kind that would cough black smoke and –

well, she didn't mind – hardly ever draw. “I can't say,” said Mom from behind her frown. “I just will know it when I see it.” Catherine, exasperated, seemed to give up. “*Bon*,” she said and popped on her helmet, no doubt desperate to motorbike off into the Paris winter chill as far and fast her red Renault could go. Still, her fierce French pride gave it one final try.

“I do know of a small, dark hole on rue de la Tour,” she said.

A hole? Mom visibly perked. Holes, especially small holes – small, *hopeless* holes of homes that no one wanted because of features that had them called holes in the first place, were my *maman*'s peculiar passion. Loaded with promise, rich in possibilities, these abused, neglected or otherwise unloved rooms, flats, houses or even châteaux called forth in her the fixer-upper's thrill of a potential project. Should said project be long, hard, sweaty, expensive and fraught with problems, all the better. A renovation in Paris to make a hole a home? Why, there was nothing save a flat in the Eiffel Tower itself that would charm my mom more.

“Oh, yes, let's go now!” she told Catherine. Rue de la Tour, so named for its Eiffel Tower view, snaked up from the Seine to the Bois de Boulogne and featured apartment buildings of every Parisian style. There were old handsome Haussmanns; sixties-era cement blocks; ancient, off-kilter buildings with rooftop maids' rooms; and post-modern *objets d'art* with lots of tinted glass. After arriving in the 16th arrondissement, Catherine's red Renault roared up to a huge crimson door – No. 9. Mom in the taxi that followed shivered with thrill at first sight of the doors. She said later: “It was like I knew without knowing that my dream was getting closer.” Catherine punched-

in the code that buzzed open the massive door, and led the way through a courtyard festooned with pots of pink geraniums. In one corner, a statue of a demure Greek maiden stood in an attitude of quiet, serene beauty. In Catherine's wake my *maman* felt her heart leap. Off the courtyard, another door buzzed open to reveal a foyer of marble floors patterned in classic black and white diamonds. The oriental carpet that padded the spiral stairway up six flights smelled of old – very old – Paris. Paris of Sainte-Chappelle candlelit at dusk. Paris of Victor Hugo's home on the Place des Vosges. Paris of the Cluny Museum and tapestries musty with history. When at last the door to Catherine's "hole" opened, my *maman* already was sold: she was home.

The apartment was a quirky collection of rooms entirely sans view but for the rain-stained, shadow-dappled wall of the building next door. If Mom got on tiptoe and looked just so, she could glimpse a miniscule patch of sky. The place was pure, unadulterated Paris. The main *salon* was a confection that featured elaborately carved ceiling moldings. The marble fireplace was quintessential Versailles in style. The toilet stood in its very own closet! The kitchen, a mere slip of a thing, was pretty in tile, and the floors – oh, the floors! Their ancient oak planks sagged so spectacularly that under the lightest step they squeaked in distress as beautifully as the radiators moaned and groaned their upset. Mom swooned at the very sight of them.

"*Alors,*" said Catherine. "*Ce n'est pas grands choses*" – it's not much. But, she added, maybe with lots *and lots* of love...

"It's perfect," interrupted my *maman*. *Parfait*. Already, she was unfurling her fantasy; she imagined her Paris life-to-be with this, her very own hole – a hole soon to be

home! The phone will ring and she will answer not “Hello?” but “*Allô?*” She will sleep not in a room, but a *chambre*, not in a bed but a *lit*. Her clothes will hang in an armoire! And on the hook behind the bathroom door she will keep...her robe? Not even close. In Paris it will be a peignoir. Positively zinging with excitement, my mother was mere steps behind Catherine who, by way of a tour, disapproved her way through the place. She opened stuck drawers with a graceless jerk, tested testy windows with a grunt, and stepped, squeaking, through the layout – two bedrooms, salon, foyer, kitchen, hallway and bath. She was careful not to catch a heel on any nail that did not lay flat. “*Merde,*” she muttered over a broken window latch, *merde* again at a mirror’s large crack. Meanwhile, my *maman* mentally plotted the apartment’s renovation. Over there, the antique armoire, she thought, seeing beyond a wall of peeling paint. And here, this dingy bedroom of beige will be reimagined in passionate pink. *The pink of a Paris sky at dusk when the light glows rose.*

“This apartment is a jewel box,” she said, coming out of her reverie. Catherine flicked off her Chanel skirt a gnat or flea or fly – she couldn’t be sure – and made a face at my mother that seemed to say it was decided: my own *maman* would serve as *the* most clueless of Catherine’s dear, naïve American children. Mom continued: “It’s hidden away, cozy and quiet. A treasure.”

True, the apartment no one (but Mom) wanted was a sanctuary of silence when compared with the city outside. Who needed a Seine view at night, my mother reasoned, when the most you can do after a long, full day of, say, Louvre-going is collapse after dinner and hot bubble...well, given the size of the tub, sitzbath? Catherine, who as a

native *Parisienne* was absolutely of the school that a beautiful view – indeed, any view at all – is better than a panorama of the neighbor’s stucco wall, squeaked over to a sad, single light bulb that swung on a string in the hall. She snapped it off. “*Bon,*” she said with grim finality. “It is settled, yes?”

“Yes!” cried my *maman*. Sheer glee danced in her face and her eyes were alight with the future. *Just think!* they reflected, *soon I’ll be not just Maman but Madame!* The fruit sellers of the sidewalk markets will say it when they hand over the peaches and plums, “*Merci, Madame.*” The counter girl at the corner *boulangerie* will, too, each time she’s asked for a dinner baguette. “*Oui, Madame.*” And even government bureaucracies France Telecom and Gaz de France will insist again and again as they make Paris home ownership a travail of incomprehensible official letters, perplexing monthly bills and nonsensical acts of apparent betrayal, “*C’est normal, Madame.*” It’s normal to charge you for telephone services you don’t have and gas you don’t use. “*C’est comme ça.*” It is how things are done, here in Paris.

An ocean away, we, her family, prepped our own lives to spend as much time in Paris as possible. Provided we were invited. “Darling, you’ll never believe, I just bought an apartment in Passy today!” she telephoned each of us in turn, her upbeat tone melodious and happy and soon to be known to us as her “Paris voice.” “I can’t wait for you to come see it.” Dad had a ticket to France in a day. Sisters Candice, who worked in the wine business, and Camille, a wife, mom and general contractor, kept a bag packed. Brothers George, a San Francisco retailer, and Tim, an attorney with three teens, considered the impossible, given their schedules: French lessons. And I, a writer, got out

my notebook. It was going to be a grand adventure, Mom's apartment in Paris. It was going to change our lives.

BRUNO IN THE AFTERNOON

He is the legendary Lothario of *l'amour* and every woman wants one: the French lover. Sexier than a Spandex bikini. Able to leap into bed after a single kiss. He is the Superman of seduction and once she's had him no woman will ever think of love again without recalling Bruno. Bruno Bruno Bruno. Strange, it seems now, how his name, French for "dark-complected," sounds so unlike the man himself, the name being so hunky, really. Hulking. Better for a bruising bodybuilder who grunts out conversation like dead-lift counts: "Hi, *hun*. What's up, *huh*?"

The Bruno she knew would never lend himself to such brutish pursuits. Her Bruno – tall, dark, handsome in the Gallic way of Louvre museum paintings she had seen, those noble-nosed, pop-eyed, aristocrats gone to the guillotine – her Bruno was as fine as that hot August night fate brought them together in Paris. She was a tourist thugs had mugged in the Métro. He was the police detective assigned to her case. His drink? Pernod. His smoke? Gauloise. His car? Peugeot. Bruno's more peculiar passion would be the wooing of her, but she couldn't yet know, not as she sat trembling at his desk in the rue Victor Hugo police station, sobbing out the drama of how three teenage yahoos, pressing a filet knife to her throat, tore her purse from her shoulder as she waited for the train to Odeon. Snuffling and teary, her passport stolen, her travelers' checks gone, she honked into the hankie he offered.

"*Désolé, Mademoiselle,*" the detective said, oozing suave in the low purr of his voice. "I am sorry." Beneath her snuffles, she was surprised to find her body secretly

perked to something in the inspector's smile. Something vaguely foreign, intriguingly French. He continued: "I am Monsieur Pannetier. Bruno. Allow me to be of service." Strange, it seems now, how Inspector Pannetier – Bruno – had only briefly to deepen his dimples and she, yet the victim of the horrific subway assault, felt criminally compelled to be subdued by him in an arm-hold, perhaps even frisked.

As it was, she soon enough was arrested by Bruno's romantic advances. Handcuffed by love, as if were. Thrown in the slammer of passion. A first date was made for coffee; a second, for snails; and by the third – two cold *crôte monsieurs* on the Champs Elysées sidewalk – kisses stood in for the cheese course and her Passy apartment became the scene for all future rendezvous. From the beginning Bruno proved to be unlike any lover she had known back home, and that included all two.

Mornings, for example, the French lover telephoned three, four times before her first double espresso.

"*Bonjour* my little rabbit!" he would trill in English so garbled with French inflection she would be his *leetle rrrrabeet*, dubbed as such for her fondness for salads of *carottes rapées*.

"Did you have a good sleep, my darling penguin?" She became his "penguin" soon after he saw her run to catch the bus, her dumpling of a *derriere* waddling, he thought, in irresistibly fetching fashion. Still a'bed and feeling boneless as she held the phone between ear and pillow, she was none too taken with Bruno's buoyancy well before her wake-up croissant. But he would not take her nodding back off for an answer.

“*Eh bien*, my adorable flea,” he’d say, “will you won’t you will you won’t you join me today at *midi*?” Noon to two was the French lover’s lunch break, a daily parole from police routine the inspector relished.

“Uh,” she managed to grunt in reply before sawing off a snore to settle back into snoozeland. This grunt, however, the French lover took to mean, *Yes, of course, mais oui! Oui Oui Oui*. Strange, it seems now, how that simple “yes” expressed again and again the months of Bruno’s romancing adjusted the latitude and longitude of her life so dramatically that today she is adrift, directionless, on a riptide of despair.

If only once she had said *No* when, instead, by 10:30 a.m. two, three days a week her home was transformed into a tropic of foliage. A paradise. Sprays of roses, marigolds, gladiolas and iris were delivered in crystal vases; armloads of tulips, tiger lilies, freesia and gardenias were dropped off in colorful pots. Bouquet after bouquet of Paris’s finest flowers often filled her vision when she lurched out of bed for the day, and the overwhelming sight made her woozy. Bruno!

“Love and kisses to my darling cuckoo, so cute,” one florist’s card read. “Can’t wait later to cuckoo-cuckoo with you. *Bisous*, xxxx, Bruno.” Another day, a blue velvet jewel box was hidden within a towering arrangement of Loire Valley wildflowers: Sapphire earrings, set in gold, glittered hello when she opened it. On one occasion, a fantasia of freshwater pearls – necklace, bracelet, hair barrette and ring – arrived with an armload of lilacs in a Limoges cachepot. Was the property hot? she momentarily flashed on the fear. After all, the Paris police detective was only of a lowly functionary’s means. Yet the French lover’s job *could* offer easy access to spectacular loot, and lots of it, routinely seized in the city’s botched robberies – *couldn’t it*? Luckily, she was ill-equipped to think further, being logy without caffeine, so she promptly lost the thought when at noon, on the dot, the door buzzer buzzed. The French lover lunged up eight

flights of spiral stairs to find her slumped on the sofa like a slattern, demitasse in hand. Her shredding chenille nightie and fuzzy pink socks appeared well-slept in; her bottle blonde bob was a perversion of sticky curls. She was uncombed, unkempt, undressed. Bruno was struck dumb with desire.

“My loving duckling, it’s noon and you’re just up?” he cried, toppling onto her for a snuggle. She struggled her hand free to sweep it wanly toward the bathroom, where a tub was running. Lavender suds scented the air and steam swirled in thick whorls out the door.

“Ah, *bon?* A bath before? But of course, my happy hen,” Bruno cooed and scampered off to strip and step into the tub. “La-la-la-laaa, lee-le-le-leeee, lo-lo-lo-loooo.” Splish-splashes sounded above the sonata Bruno sang, slopping suds (she was sure) all over the bathroom floor. The plastic duckie decoratively displayed in the soap dish was forced in (she was equally sure) for a swim. She didn’t know what to think of Bruno’s bathtime jollies, except perhaps...well, did her new lover have enthusiasms beyond those suggested by his earnest detective’s demeanor? Intimate caprices that were completely...kooky? Sexual tralas that were mysteriously, perhaps embarrassingly...she didn’t know...French? Alarmed, she clutched the collar of her nightie closed; she scrunched her pink-stockinged feet more snugly beneath her. And she fought to dismiss the thought. *French men, notoriously, are the sine qua non of lovers, no?* she argued. *The sovereign lords of l’amour.* Let’s be frank, she reasoned, Americans the only men she had known – had yet to twist her knickers with the kind of thrill for which the French are legend with their inbred, in-bed je ne sais quoi, right? *Right!?* “There, there, now,” she muttered. “There is nothing to fear that a big gulp of *vin blanc* at lunch can’t handle.” “La-la-la-laaaa,” went Bruno’s song; splish-splash went the bath. Allowing herself to relax, she fell into a swoon of expectancy.

Imagine! Soon, a French lover, *her* French lover would go spelunking through her caves of unexplored passions. Soon, ecstasies as yet unbidden would trip her pleasure fantastic. She quickly doused her arousal with a slurp of coffee. Be cool, she snapped to. Hard to get. You don't want the detective snooping out clues of desperation, do you? Over 30 and single – still. Pathetic. She reshifted her nightie into a peephole of décolleté. She worked up a passable come-hither expression. Just then, the bathroom door flew back and out he galloped: Bruno! A flash of flesh; a tall, tan blur; the slick, sudsy French lover was on the run, trailing ribbons of lavender-scented steam.

“Yippee-yippee-yee-hah...giddy-up!” he hooted, urging forward a horse only he could see beneath him. “Yippee-yee-hah!” He galloped past where she sat paralyzed on the sofa, stunned. He turned and trotted back. A single square of toilet tissue covered his naked *zizi*, stuck in place with an Ouchless Band-Aid. “Whoa!” he halted before her. “What-ho! A damsel in distress? Dismount, men.” Dismount dismount dismount. If only she had, then and there, gotten off her ride to the frontier of love with Bruno, she might have had a chance. A chance for what was unclear. A lifelong marriage? A stable family? Perhaps. She had come to France fresh from college to perfect her French and prepare for a career perhaps as a professional translator. Love could wait. A proper match made if not in heaven at least in her hometown country club followed by babies planned and paid for was the way; a happily ever after was the why; and anyway, everyone knows lovers aren't husbands except in ridiculous romantic fantasies. And yet...yet...when Bruno “dismounted” to bend and kiss her hand, his *zizi*'s square of toilet tissue fluttering seductively, she was hopelessly, helplessly, booked, confirmed, on the stagecoach of desire. There was not a chance of backing out of the trip.

“Damsel, allow me to forswear other mademoiselles of marvelousness and love you and you alone,” Bruno murmured. What could she do but submit, her fuzzy pink

socks slipping off to unveil to her French lover the mysteries her body held down to the tips of her pretty peach pedicured toes.

Bruno in the afternoon soon became a habit, then a passion. Possibly, it was an addiction, as consuming of body and soul as any illegal drug. Tracks of remembered kisses scarring her tender breasts. Wretched in its utter contempt for her better sense. Bruno Bruno Bruno. She had to have him. Six *midis* per week, seven. “Dear Mom and Dad,” she wrote home to San Francisco. “I have found him. Bruno. I wish to be married within the week.” Her parents, naturally, were aghast. A French detective! No, this would not do. This would not do at all. Friends of friends in France received the mayday message: “She must be stopped!” her family faxed. “Get her on a plane out of Paris, pronto.”

Pronto pronto pronto. Strange, it seems now, how haste never did figure in when her plane home to the States lifted off from the airport Charles de Gaulle. Oh-so-slowly she got around to getting the ticket. Oh-so-poky she was in packing. In fact, by the time she actually boarded – alone – weeks had passed. And the snit she was in was as painfully swollen as were her ankles, as out of control as were her Burger King cravings. All the signs told of it: She was pregnant. And miffed. At Bruno. Her French lover, now her bridegroom, had married her at a civil if un-festive city hall ceremony and now was begging-off on the honeymoon – a trip home to meet her family.

“But my adorable duckling, I must stay here in France until I find the finest Champagne she ever has produced,” was his excuse. “It is this and only this that will properly herald the arrival of our son.” The sonogram would later confirm it: a son.

So while Bruno in his Peugeot on his off-duty hours sped from wine shop to wine shop, his American bride sat in San Francisco nursing her snit as six months passed, then seven. Bereft of job prospects, she had no choice but to move in with her parents. They

were more grossly aghast. As the Peugeot – with Bruno – blew through Biarritz and raced through Chamonix, as it criss-crossed Provence and careened through Alsace, she waited and waited...and waited. Within her the baby grew; without, her face fixed itself into a frown of frustration.

Where in damnation is that man? she wondered, though he wrote four times a week, or five. “*Bonjour Mommy penguin-to-be!*” his Marseille postcard read. “I will join my snugly guppy in California just as soon as my boss at the police station unjails me (ha ha).” She didn’t laugh.

Eight months passed, nine. “My Darling Wife,” the French lover at last scratched on the back of an Eiffel Tower photo. “The Champagne is found! Our son may now arrive.” Arrive arrive arrive. Strange now to recall how in short order everything would, everything but Bruno: first the baby, then obstetric bills, and finally, panic. “For crying out loud,” her father whined one night when the infant’s wailing shook the house. “Where on earth is that no-show of yours?” But she had only excuses.

Bruno is still back in France (she told him as much as she knew of her husband’s pursuits) – painting scenes of his childhood home in colors of the Côte d’Azur sky. Yes, you’ll find him in France (she kept going), planting a half acre of trees at his parents’ place, the cypress and redwoods he loves. At his sister’s in Provence he is paving slate paths, constructing stone walls, tending to olives and growing a garden of sunflowers, string beans, squash. He is carving a cradle from the best French oak with our new baby’s name – William – burnished in gold. By day he is sewing together a set of leather luggage and hand-making a fly-fishing rod; by night he composes sonatas – on guitar. Days off, he grills the wild trout he catches, sun-dries the tomatoes he grows, reupholsters the loveseat he crafted and, *sigh*, strings a bracelet of fine pink gold. The bracelet’s 12 links, each in the shape of a perfect teardrop, represent, he mentioned, *un an*

de chagrain, the “year of grief” it is to be away from me. Bruno is writing poems, collecting Limoges, drinking *pastis* and smoking. Weekends, he restores his best friend’s chateau.

Yes, the French lover’s life was so positively plump with projects he scarcely had time for a wife. And yet, she waited. Once the baby was old enough for daycare she took a receptionist’s job with a cable-TV concern. Four months passed, five. Uncombed, unkempt, and stressed, the day the call came – wildly out of the blue - she was on her knees sopping up a pot of spilled coffee. “*J’arrive!*” squealed Bruno from the airport pay phone. “At last I come to you, my scrumptious sweet.” Oh?! She couldn’t speak. Along with Bruno came a collection of crates and crates...and crates. Nine of them, 10. Stacked at an off-site airport will-call, there were knickknacks, door knockers, lamps and antiques; there were French gadgets for kitchen and bath. The French lover’s accompanying haul from his homeland was no less than all he’d ever owned, or would. “My cuddly cauliflower, it is here, in *l’Amerique*, I stand!” he squealed. “Will you won’t you will you won’t you quit work and come play with me?”

Play play play. Strange, she thinks now, how back then she had no clue that her imported husband was never destined for the role she ached he play. Dress him in a U.S. banker’s tie, a broker’s button-down, or a bond trader’s pinstripes; put him a postal clerk’s shirt sleeves or top him with a restaurant chef’s toque; even fit his fine French physique into the schlumpy duds of a hard-boiled private eye in keeping with his current career: The French lover would be like an exotic creature captured, caged – a creature who suffers horribly to be free. Bruno and the workaday, not-much-pay world simply seemed somehow, sadly, mismatched. Like an exquisite Gruyère soufflé taken with coffee, black. Or a delicate silk charmeuse gown worn with high-top basketball shoes. Bruno, quite frankly, was fashioned more for love. Or was it fun?

But because she had no clue, she and the newly-landed French lover, with baby William making them a family, moved into a seaside studio. She went to work, William learned to talk, and Bruno tried to adapt. How far he was from France! Without a job he had days free to launch a hodge-podge of projects. He grew vegetables in the garden and with a trowel made a pond. With lily pads. And frogs. In front of the cottage he planted trees of apple, pear and plum; in back they were lemon and almond. The French lover restored an heirloom armoire, baked berry tarts, taught his son French, studied Italian, stacked wood, cut grass and cooked *pâté en croûte* from scratch. He made bookcases, a barbeque nook, a cat's bed, an arbor. With bougainvillea. And roses.

“*Chérie*, let me tend your crabby mood with my *grandmaman*'s special soup,” he fussed one day among most when she arrived home from work to find his résumé still on the desk (unsent) and the Help Wanted ads (unlooked-at) lining the garbage can. She had staggered in late, rain-soaked and racked with a head cold. In her purse the paltry paycheck that was the buoy of their survival weighted her body with woe. “Suit yourself,” she wheezed and sneezed – and sneezed again – when Bruno, panting with passion, kneeled tenderly to remove her sopping galoshes. “Oh, my only penguin, true,” he said. “I would sell my treasured soul for one kiss hello, perhaps two.”

Wouldn't you know, there were 11 kisses, 12. And later by the light of the moon when Bruno bent in the garden to gather the carrots and onions and squash he would take until nearly midnight to chop, simmer and painstakingly spice into soup, she looked upon her French lover from the kitchen window and gave her brow a good bonk with my palm.

“*Why*, when a quick can of Campbell's would do,” (bonk bonk) “do I indulge him so, my Bruno?”

She mulled over this conundrum the night her Provençal mate barbecued pork ribs in the bedroom fireplace. “My darling, just wait!” he argued when she objected. “They

are *gorgeous* when cooked in the heart of the home.” She examined the conundrum again the day of his interview with the special career counselor when she learned Bruno hadn’t shown. “I can’t get away, *mon amour*, my guests await!” he said, breathless, when she called from the office to hear his excuse. It was a doozy. Rather than pursue the interview, Bruno was whipping up a make-believe meal of Coquille Saint-Jacques (with snowy heaps of *gorgeous* garlic potatoes) for William and a preschool playmate; his chef’s accoutrements? A miniature French toy tea set.

The question got another going over the morning of the French lover’s appointment with the VIP her father’s people arranged as a favor when Bruno did indeed show – only elsewhere. At the confirmed hour, while the VIP (he later grouched) checked his watch, twiddled his stress-relieving whatnot, and waited on the 49th floor of the downtown office tower, the French lover was perched perky and alert on a stool in the art school next door. He was eager for his intro-to-oil painting lesson. “If you must know, my luscious éclair,” he said when she griped about this, yet another ruined employment opportunity, “there is no dearer wish for a man than that he make immortal the intoxicating essence of his beloved – as I have done here.” He handed her a portrait of herself conceived in lush orange curves, with big chartreuse hair and a doublewide smile that bore scant resemblance to her current chronic snarl. “Thus your fair, moody beauty is etched onto my heart,” continued the French lover. “It is there, forever, as exquisite as our love.”

And she pondered the problem especially the Sunday dusk Bruno, during a commercial break from a 72-hour, John Wayne TV film-fest, charged through the house as - no, could it be? – an Apache. “Me want to take my pretty Pocahontas here, now!” he chanted among Indian warrior whoops as he hopped on one leg, then the other, whooping, through each room. The French lover was ablaze in fiery war paint: hot pink

and coral lipstick zig-zagged ancient tribal markings down his bare, hairless chest. A spray of seagull feathers projected askew from his jogger's headband. Making do for deerskin, a flap of designer paper towel was duct-taped into place – a loin-cloth replete with “Have a nice day!” smiley faces.

At first sight she brought her vacuum cleaner to a screeching halt in the hall. “I swear, *Bruno...*” she stared at her earnest Indian. “You think you are being so...” Before she could expel the “f” in “funny,” the French lover bodily detached her from her Dust Buster, threw her over his shoulder, and, with the baby rattles attached to his ankles rattling, he rain-danced through the den and threw her off onto the living room La-Z-Boy. It was only a minute, or two, before she knew: the Dust Buster would have to idle awhile without her.

The day the French lover booked an early flight to France, however, was the day the conundrum demanded an answer. France France France. Strange, it seems now, how the land of baguettes and berets was fated to reclaim as its own, her Bruno. With barely an “*à bientôt,*” Bruno flew off and settled into a minuscule flat near Paris's Palais Royale. The next day, his police detective squad welcomed him back with balloons, a banner (“*Bienvenue!*”) and a bigger, shinier badge. His first morning at work the French lover tacked a photo of William on the wall above his desk next to the “Most Wanted” posters, and dug out of a drawer his favorite CD – a collection of tragic Corsican love songs. As the mournful tunes soaked his office in bittersweet gloom, again-Detective Pannetier opened a file marked “Unsolved Homicides” and, absentmindedly, fiddled with the pistol from which he had been away far too long. *Ah*, he thought, lighting the first in a chain of Gauloises and letting the tears freely fall, *it feels oh, so good to be home.*

“I love you, I love you truly, I do!” he wrote to her two, three times a week, or phoned. Yet, an ocean away, she was too, too stunned to understand. “Ah, my happy

penguin,” he faxed, “how my far-away family fills my fragile French heart with joy.” Unclear, unconvinced, in a dither, she took a poorly-paying job in a chiropractor’s office. Her friends were incensed.

“What in damnation happened to that man?” they demanded. She wondered, too. Hadn’t she hoped love – his love, for her – would inspire the French lover to cast off his country like the Mediterranean clams he always so expertly shucked from their shells and come to her culture with charm intact? Hadn’t the baby been enough to bolt him to the grindstone so she could stay home William’s first few years? And really, hadn’t her beloved USA – her *home* – promised him a life more...well, *real* than one in which he can gallop around naked on a make-believe steed? As if in a husband that’s normal? Inspector Pannetier – Bruno – has gone back in France (she told them). Yes, you will find him in France. His gallant Gallic heart is so entwined with the daily sights of the Eiffel Tower, his soul so at-home with strolls along the Seine, that the French lover living anywhere but Paris (she suspected) is like the Louvre stripped of its Mona Lisa, the Moulin Rouge removed of its sequined showgirls: incomplete, wanting, wrong. She honked into the hankie one or another offered and wept hot tears of woe.

It was some weeks before Bruno wrote on the back of a *Les Invalides* lithograph: “My charming chicken, to know we’ll be in our hearts together always, laughing and happy, is the inextinguishable light of my foolish French life.”

Foolish foolish foolish. Strange, it seems now, given distance, how far and fast she fell for the French lover. The thousand and one nights of passion promised by Inspector Pannetier’s first *bonjour* now calamitously...kaput. The marvelous French *je ne sais quoi* contained in her dream of a future as Bruno’s True Love...gone to smash. *Nuts*, she muttered over the loss of her hopes for a Happily Ever After. I am simply a wretched romantic. And it’s over. After all, this friend or that urged her to follow the French lover

to France and become a proper Parisian *madame*. A mere police detective's wife. Just think of it! And she did. The rest of her life, her youth gone, her beauty spent, passed in a tiny government-subsidized flat – a hole, really – with a man happiest either dinging pinballs and hoisting *pastis* at the corner café or nakedly interpreting Columbus's conquest of the Americas? She shuddered. She knew she never could forsake her bright American future in exchange for a forever under grey Paris skies. Especially since the great effort of speaking French always gave her a migraine. Yet the day she went in for the test and it came back a "yes", her migraine proved to know no boundary of country or culture. She was pregnant. The French lover had wreaked his romance upon her. Again.

She telephoned Bruno with the news, tracking him down at a Marais district bistro where he and 13 of his best police pals were yukking it up over garlic escargots. Through the telephone line the background music boomed, the pinballs dinged and she almost could smell the café's choking smoke in the raspy voice of her absentee husband.

"Ya-hoo, ya-hoo!" he hooted with happiness at word of her condition. "There's a pee-wee penguin on the way! Champagne for all!" he hooted. Cradling the portable to her ear in the hall of her parents' home – where again she moved – she slobbered torrents of tears and soaked to a shred her one woeful wad of tissue. "*Je t'aime beaucoup*, my little cuckoo," she heard her far-away French lover coo. "I promise to rejoin you and our wonderful wee ones just as soon..."

"For crying out loud!" her father's baritone boomed from the dining room. "Where in holy hosanna is that man?" With a choke she squeaked "Gotta go, Bruno; goodbye," and put down the phone. She stood alone with only excuses.

Bruno is where he belongs, yes Bruno is back in France (she told him and blubbered into the hankie he offered). Yes, you will find him in France – with plans. He will copy in colored pen the cave paintings of Lascaux to brighten his bare flat walls. He

will plant for his mother Monet's gardens of Giverny, and for his *papa* prepare *steak au poivre*. He will make paté, bake croissants and take-up the art of wood whittling. He will attend classes in tango, tap, salsa and ballroom; he'll hunt for truffles in the forest, and in the Alps he'll ski. In the Mediterranean Sea he will dive for langoustines, and come fall in Provence he will help harvest his friends' Chardonnay. And then: he will piece together from pink shells of Polynesia a plaque for the new baby's cradle. "Thomas" it will read.

Yes, the French lover's life was so positively picturesque that he scarcely had time for a flight. Or so she consoled herself when day after day, week after week, she waited, buoyed by his promise made two times a month or three, that the next Air France jet to touch down in San Francisco would contain him, her very own, Bruno. "Have patience for I will come to be with you for good, my delectable dumpling, just as soon as I..." he phoned, faxed or dashed-off in a note with this excuse, or that. And the months continued to pass. Still, she waited.

Within, baby boy No. 2 grew and grew, and just before Christmas was born with Bruno's bold brow and kooky, crooked smile. Without, her face fixed itself into the picture of complacency. It was a mask perfect for those hundreds of times when anyone asked. *So tell me, they'd say, what has become of Inspector Pannetier?*

"He was and will be always my French lover," she would say, as practiced. "He was and will be always my dream too special to make real."

"My penguins, how Papa loves you so!" the French lover writes from France two, three times a week, or phones. "When next I fly over to see my flock of happy geese I shall make you giggle with all the best surprises, you know?" She knows, she knows, she knows.

* * *

Ten years have passed and the official divorce, recently signed and newly final, is on file. In the bedroom of the home she alone acquired, thanks to some startling, unexpected success in the wine business, her new fiancé reads the *Wall Street Journal* through half-glasses slung low on his nose. When he takes a bath there is no splish-splashing, no suds, no sonata. Naked he is neither cowboy nor Indian but mere businessman – all business. William and Thomas, now nearly in high school, are thriving. Still, when the French lover emails his messages once a day or texts, she can't help but feel her heart lurch just a little in longing.

“Eh bien, my love so true, will you won't you will you won't you drop all to come frolic with me?” his email might read. “What, Bruno again?” says her fiancé from the bed. “It's nothing,” she says and her face betrays her lie. For it isn't. Indeed, it isn't really so strange, come to think of it, how Bruno's every visit, whether it lasts one week or three, brings him back into her heart, however briefly. No, it's not really so strange, after all, how her French lover forever will mean family, mean home, however fleetingly.

PARIS WITH PARENTS

Bazaar Hôtel de Ville

In the bed department of Bazaar Hôtel de Ville, Mademoiselle in charge of duvets pulls a particularly puffy one from the display of every weight – summer, autumn, Arctic – and offers a feel to Dad. Mom, meanwhile, sits weary and collapsed on a sample bed, careful not to muss its crisp, pleated sheets of mauve, or in despair bury her head in the fluffy pillows.

“Monsieur, zis is *très* warm, zee best,” Mademoiselle says, her English an effort, but clear. “You will not be cold some more. *Non.*” She shakes her head. Dad fondles the corner of the duvet with suspicion to feel if its composition – 50% down, 50% feathers – can ease the chill he has carried since he and Mom arrived in Paris six days earlier. Because their newly-acquired apartment is not yet fitted with even a single twig of furniture, for five nights they have slept on the floor on a camper’s blow-up mattress. The blow-up has a leak that hisses but can’t be seen and a pump that’s French – hence, too foreign to manage without a nervous collapse.

“You know? Maybe I should just get the plane home,” Dad blurts in a tone of high irritation. Mademoiselle flinches.

“Well, maybe you just *should*,” says Mom. She is *so hot*, sitting there in the mauve. Outside, the Paris winter freezes away in teeny, tiny temperatures and an unfriendly wind whips. Visiting the over-heated department store while overdressed in layer upon layer, plus coat and hat and gloves and scarf causes Mom to sweat. She flings

off her woolen beanie and gives her husband of nearly 60 years “the black look” that in earlier days sent him straight to the bar but now, many decades sober, inspires him instead to rattle Mademoiselle.

“Ah, but oh, Monsieur,” she stammers. “Perhaps zis will be better for you and Madame.” She pulls out a different duvet from the display and offers it to Dad for a feel. This comforter – 60% down, 40% feathers – does little to tamp down his temper. As the black look seeps into his marrow he turns toward the bed to slit his eyes at Mom.

Their fight began, if not the day they married a mere two weeks after they met on a blind date, certainly their first night in the apartment. A fake duvet of polyfill Mom had provided Dad let his feet poke out in the night. Monsieur Landita, the building handyman, would not fix the first thing that said *bienvenue* when they arrived – a broken heater – until he returned from vacation in Spain in another four, freezing, *possibly fatal* nights, to hear Dad tell it. His chill was unforgiveable.

“It was meant for a *child*,” Dad with a pout says not to Mom but to Mademoiselle, his tone conveying the frost of a wronged husband. Mademoiselle is perky, petite and pained by Dad’s blast of crabbiness. At the smack of it her young, fresh features shift from a shopgirl smile into a shape that could, with the slightest encouragement, cry. But she will not be abused.

“Yes, yes, but *zis*,” she says with strength and unfurls a decidedly adult-sized duvet – for two – and invites Dad to feel it, fluff it; maybe he will even lie under it on the display bed next to Mom and imagine the possibilities? “*Zis* makes for warm feet and,” she aims a sympathetic smirk in Mom’s direction, “warm feelings.” Mom moves a

mauve pillow onto her lap. It looks like if she chooses to throw it, it will be good and ready.

“Honestly, who is the child? Who is the child *now*?” Mom’s voice is as hot as her legs under their itchy, foul-weather tights. Dad doesn’t answer and nixes the duvet-for-two by wandering off in the direction of the sheets-and-pillowshams display.

Mademoiselle follows.

I stand sagging against a floor display of bedskirts, over-hot in my own hat and coat, and listen to my parents carry on. This is Paris – Paris! We should be loving every inch of it, every minute, as they create a home away from home of their new apartment, and I spend 10 days of European vacation making the best of them. That is to say, knowing full well I’m to cherish every ticking second I have with my precious, aging parents while we’re here, together in this magical city – even though they make me as jumpy as they do Mademoiselle. Over in sheets-and pillowshams, I see her pulling from stacks a selection of sheets with a rat-a-tat efficiency of one determined to please: a sales pro.

“Yes, Monsieur,” she’s saying. “Perhaps something very soft – Egyptian cotton, the very best – in a soothing color. Blue? Yes? Perhaps this will please you and Madame?”

Madame isn’t pleased. In fact, Madame won’t be pleased at all unless and until Dad decides on a duvet, *today*, a decision that will free her from one more torturous night on the floor dealing with Dad’s thrashing and complaints. Their bed, on order, will arrive

at the apartment in French time. This means whenever it will, no one involved in its purchase and delivery can say when.

“Tom!” Mom calls, with the uncharacteristic *Mommie Dearest* edge she resorts to in catastrophes. Like when Dad pretends not to hear her, even though he, totally deaf in one ear and diminished in the other, really can’t. And because he can’t hear: “TOM!” She motions him over and I, still sagging into the bedskirts, feel 5 not 50, and afraid. *Uh-oh, somebody’s in trouble.*

“Tom, let’s just focus on the duvet,” she says when Dad returns, trailing Mademoiselle and her hands-full of blue sheets. “Okay?”

“Okay!” says Mademoiselle, cheery as can be. She off-loads her pile onto a sample bedroom bureau and makes it point to ignore my parents like they are naughty children whose bad behavior best not be rewarded in any positive way.

“Mademoiselle,” says Mademoiselle, instead turning to me. I flinch. *Now I’ll have to be involved.*

“*Papa* and *Maman*, they love to love, yes?”

Oh my God.

“Soft blue sheets, very soft, will be lucky for love, for *l’amour*, do you see?”

No, no, I don’t want to see! But I pipe-up for the sake of Mademoiselle, who seems to be trying so hard to, what, make a sale? Get Mom and Dad dealt with and out of there? “Yes, blue. Very beautiful.”

The determined way she does not flee to help other customers, *nicer* customers, customers who surely will buy something, is a minor miracle. A miracle much like the

58 years my parents have held together. Never mind the dozen years of divorce they entertained before remarrying in a romantic elopement to Lake Tahoe to which their five children and seven grandkids were not invited: Mom and Dad since their first date, which happened *after* he proposed and she accepted at the post-college party where they met, have choreographed a relationship whose steps, however intricate, no one but they know. Least of me, cringing with their bickering as if all of Paris will tsk-tsk at their lack of respect and, offended, shun us from sharing in all the love the city promises – not least with its idea of a bed. The soft and seductive one now holding up my mother, for instance, is frilled in romantic ruffles and prettied by a slinky, satin coverlet. If it doesn't say *come to bed, darling*, I don't know what does. But really, as if Mademoiselle with her sheet suggestions can have my parents happy together on a flabby, half-deflated blow-up mattress when there are Dad's cold feet and who knows what else between them!

Still, I am entranced by Mademoiselle's idea that *l'amour* is simply a set of sheets away. That luck in love may apply to my parents, as she so optimistically implies. I am so entranced, in fact, that I miss whatever Dad says next, but it must have been classic, because Mom's response seems as ready as the mauve pillow.

"Maybe you should just stay in a *hotel*," she says.

"Maybe I just *should*," says Dad.

Other bed department shoppers who wander among the displays hear my parents, sense the danger, and cut a wide swath around the zone of hostility they have formed;

some even scoot away fast like Mom and Dad are a blast about to detonate.

Mademoiselle is made of steelier stuff.

“Oh, *mais non!*” she clucks. “*Non, non, non.*” She levels her gaze at Dad. “Feel this!” Off-topic of sheets and back on duvets, she challenges him to fondle an especially puffy one – 70% down, 30% feathers – and unfurls the thing so it lies on the display bed in a splendor of promised warmth and comfort. Mom scooches over a bit to give the duvet better play. To help it lie flat she puffs and pats the mauve pillow back into place beneath the headboard. At Mademoiselle’s urging Dad drops onto the smallest possible sliver of the bed’s edge as if at gunpoint, and his reluctant, put-upon expression causes Mom to roll her eyes. *He’s so impossible.* Mademoiselle, however, is triumphant.

“*Mais oui!*” she sings in the trilling way of those flirty Frenchwomen. She is all girl, with short skirt and a sexy playful wink. Her charm alone could chase the chill right out of Dad’s feet, and I wonder: what effect might she have on a fever? Watching my parents impose their...their...well, their *thing* on an innocent bystander like Mademoiselle makes me *so hot* in my two sweaters and coat and gloves and scarf. The lack of control I have of them! To stave off a faint I try to breathe...one...two...three, unbutton my coat to vent some steam, and wonder, what happened?

Mom and Dad were all laughs mere hours earlier when we sat Paris-people watching on the sidewalk terrace of café Les Deux Magots in St. Germain des Pres. Four tables over lunched (gasp!) the actor Jeremy Irons, looking bleary-eyed, bedheaded...tired.

“I know that guy,” said Dad, indiscreetly staring. “I think I worked with him once. I’m going to go see if he remembers me.” Dad, a career stockbroker who most certainly has never worked with Jeremy Irons, stood up and was halfway to his table to ask if the actor remembered him when Mom and I yanked him back in giggly panic, *no!*

Between then and our visit to the bed department, something must have been said. A choice aside on the Métro ride to get dessert sorbet on the Île Saint-Louis. Or a loaded look cocked and shot as we walked past Notre Dame. Secrets, lies, unwelcome surprises. Joys, marvels, miracles. My parents’ love story features it all. Their tale is a triumph over typical marital trauma – alcohol, infidelity, money worries, in-law issues, problems. Acquiring an apartment in Paris several years after their remarriage was to be not just amends, but also a second honeymoon, a dream come true, a wildly exciting next installment – the part where the happily-ever-after happens.

Yet here it is: my parents’ marriage on public display in Paris.

“Oh, stop it,” says Mom.

“*You* stop it,” says Dad.

“No, you.”

“You.”

I study my shoes in shame. *What must Mademoiselle think?* This is Paris – Paris! A place where in a setting of incredible beauty, romance simply cannot *not* happen. Take *Psyche Revived by Cupid’s Kiss*, Antonio Canova’s spectacular winged sculpture in the Louvre. Or any of Renoir’s knockout nudes, plump and luscious, displayed in the Musée de l’Orangerie. There are, especially, the ancient, gilded buildings lit at night in a

sensation to dazzle the senses, and the Eiffel Tower's on-the-hour show of lightplay.

Here, in the City of Light indeed, love good, love true and, if you're a ridiculous romantic like me, even love beautiful seems suggested, if not inspired. What's more, everywhere you look, lovers themselves woo one another. They are hand-in-hand strolling the Seine, kissing in sidewalk cafés, patting fannies with affection in the parks and Luxembourg Gardens. They are even snickering *à deux* like the huggy couple who now linger on the fringe of the zone of hostility, gawking at Mom and Dad like they've never before seen such a crazy-strange thing as this. *You are in Paris and not madly in love? Madness!*

Mademoiselle, too, stares at my prickly parents with an expression of puzzled incomprehension. I imagine her unkind thoughts. Surely she has decided they are a blight on love itself. That when it comes to the art of *l'amour*, Americans certainly are poor practitioners. That not only could she, a Parisian for whom a feel for romance is in the genes, not even begin to school these hopeless two in its rudiments, but she also better call-in her *supervisor* to sell the duvet because, clearly, here is a couple she can't help.

Wrong.

Instead she flits away in her clicking kitten heels, wafting a scent so sweet that when it reaches me I could weep. The little-girl me longs for Mommy and Daddy to be sweet, too. If only it were as easy as holding my breath until I turn blue and die to make them sorry. But it's not. Still, *who's the grown-up? Who's the grown-up, now?* Making like the more savvy shoppers, I start to tip-toe from the scene. If I'm far, far from the blast – say, otherwise enjoying tea in the café that's in a distant corner of the floor – I should be safe.

Before I can sneak off, however, Mademoiselle is back. She is flushed and winking and *thrilled* that she has found the perfect thing.

“*Voilà.*” she trills. “Madame, Monsieur, you will see. Shoes off!” She holds an armful of duvet – 100% down – and in one impressive swoop sweeps the duvet that’s on the bed off, and flutters its replacement into place between the opposite edges of bed upon which my parents perch. Shoes off? Dad catches on right away, slips out of his walking moccasins and, coat and all, slides beneath the down; his head is on the pillow Mom could have thrown but did not. In a split-second shift Mom’s eyes go merry with mischief. *I know what you are up to.* And she goes along. Shoeless, she slides under the pouf. “Nice,” she sighs.

Maybe it was frisky footsie, or possibly a well-timed tickle, I can’t say. I missed it. I was busy watching Mademoiselle regard my parents with the pride of one for whom all is, as the French say, *comme ça*. The way things are. The stars aligned, the earth in its orbit, the lovers united. But whatever it was, Mom and Dad do indeed detonate – into great loud guffaws of embarrassing laughter. The huggy couple does, too.

“*Très bien,*” says Mademoiselle, beaming as her prize duvet billows and waves with Mom and Dad beneath – forgiving, forgetting, and, rolling around in a fully, *fully* clothed hug, together forging ahead. “*Très très bien.*”

“We’ll take it!” says Dad, now happy. And my parents carry-on – laughing.

AUVERS-SUR-OISE
The Heart and Home of van Gogh

*What am I in the eyes of most people? – a nobody, or an
eccentric and disagreeable man, somebody
who has no position in society and never will have,
in short, the lowest of the low.
Very well, even if that were true, then I should
want to show by my work what there is
in the heart of such an eccentric man,
of such a nobody.*

Vincent van Gogh, 1882

I stand alone in the room in which van Gogh died. If I situate myself in the center and stretch my arms out wide, it seems only an inch or two before I touch the wall on the left, the wall on the right. Tiny, still and silent, the room is furnished with only a small, simple wood chair. It is left bare so pilgrims to the artist's rental room in the Auberge Ravoux in the country town of Auvers-sur-Oise can, without distraction, better sense his spirit. Here, 35 km outside Paris, none of the boisterous exuberance of color that explodes into *Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers* (1888) dazzles the eye, no knickknacks nod to the mad passions that drive the brushstrokes of *Starry Night* (1889). Somber, serene, flooded with light and hinting of the holy, the room in which the artist succumbed to a gunshot wound to the chest nonetheless stuns. History long has held the creative genius with a tormented, restless soul shot himself in a cornfield nearby – crows circling, skies troubled – and staggered back here to languish two days and then die with his favorite pipe in his mouth and devoted brother, Theo, bedside. New evidence collected in *Van Gogh: The Life*, a startling 2011 biography by Pulitzer Prize-winning authors Steven

Naifeh and Gregory White Smith fairly proves otherwise: that he was shot accidentally – in a courtyard – by a harrying kid playing at being a cowboy.

I consider the quote that hangs behind glass above the absent deathbed: “Some day or other, I believe I will find a way to have my own exhibition in a café.” This van Gogh wrote with hope to Theo on June 10, 1890; at the time he was in the throes of the illness (temporal lobe epilepsy) that so characterized his art and life. Some day or other – today – van Gogh’s multi-million dollar landscape *Auvers After the Rain* (1890), housed in Moscow’s Pushkin Museum, is considered such a treasure that France’s museum bureaucracy has yet to allow its display in this room, as the Auberge Ravoux’s owner, Institut van Gogh, would like. The artist’s dream was to “make drawings that *touch* some people,” as he described in an 1882 letter to Theo. He could not foresee how triumphantly they have come to do just that. Were *Auvers After the Rain* allowed to hang in Auberge Ravoux, security needs alone for this, like others of his “drawings” now valued in the tens of millions of dollars, would turn van Gogh’s little room into a specter of Louvre-like to-do. The artist’s letter continues: “I want to reach so far that people will say of my work: he feels deeply, he feels tenderly – notwithstanding my so-called roughness, perhaps even because of this.”

Being here in the town in which van Gogh died, is a revelation. Deeper than ever before now go my own feelings for what the artist often called his “studies.” Newly tender is my heart toward the visionary who said of himself in a rare moment of confidence, “I know for sure I have an instinct for colour, and that it will come to me more and more, that painting is in my very bone and marrow.” What do I know for sure?

It is Auvers that has brought me to this place of profound appreciation, Auvers that has opened my eyes to what van Gogh himself knew: “It is true that I am often in the greatest misery,” the lonely artist wrote to Theo in 1882; he was living in The Hague and about to take-in the destitute prostitute Clasina Maria Hoornik (Sien) and her child. “But still there is within me a calm pure harmony and music.”

Downstairs in the Auberge Ravoux, where van Gogh took his meals for 3.50 francs a day, the dining room is packed with locals lunching on foie gras, coq au vin and other classically rustic fare. In fact, so authentically recreated is the inn that appealed to 19th c. bourgeois diners who were comfortable in artists’ cafés of the day – zinc bar, checkered floor – that I almost expect to see him sitting, paint-splattered and careworn, at one of the wax-polished tables. Here, I will indulge in a delicious lunch of French country sole, warm *tarte tatin* with cream, and plenty of excellent *fromage*. Afterward, I again will venture upstairs to a small, darkened theater to watch a 12-minute video of the 70 days van Gogh spent in Auvers, working maniacally (77 paintings was his output), and dying with the words, “Do not accuse anyone. It is I who wanted to kill myself.” Like the two other tourists in the tiny theater, I will weep. Buckets.

* * *

The French hamlet of Auvers on the river Oise is a 45-minute train-ride northwest from Paris’s Gare du Nord. If I’m driving, it’s a trip of two hours-plus. My hapless journey includes navigation of the maddening mayhem of autoroutes, wrong exits, false turns, one-way *rues* and what have you around the airport Charles de Gaulle. Never mind. Once Auvers at last appears over the crest of a lovely country road flounced by

blossoming chestnut trees, it's clear why the town has been called "the cradle of Impressionism."

"Profoundly beautiful, it is the real country, characteristic and picturesque," van Gogh said of it, arriving after painters like Pissarro, Monet, Daubigny (of the Barbizon school) and Cézanne had, from the mid-1800s onward, lived or worked here. While no longer graced by the vast expanses of the wheat fields and cozy thatched huts van Gogh captured in *Wheat Fields with Auvers in the Background* (1890), the long, narrow town hugs a plateau of some sprawling fields still open to the sky. Here, the village church, whose stained glass windows are portrayed tilting and cobalt-hued in *The Church at Auvers* (1890) stands exactly as it did for the artist. And here, he and his brother Theo, who died a mere six months after van Gogh due to, it's said, a broken heart, are buried side by side in the most unpretentious of manners in the most humble of French village cemeteries.

Post-film I tissue away tears and venture out on an Auvers walkabout that includes a visit to both. After a short uphill hike past the church, where a laughing bride and groom make their getaway in an antique Citroën under showers of flowers and birdseed and blessings tossed by wedding guests, the country lane crosses a field looking awfully *Wheat Field in Auvers* (1890) and ends abruptly at the cemetery. No sign points the way, no tourist ticket booth looms. And there, in the shadow of an embarrassment of a plot belonging to...a painter? I lean-in to get a better look. Yes, it's the grave of a totally unknown artist who is grandly memorialized by a soaring, gilded, granite monument complete with his photo in full-color porcelain. Practically blinded by the

ostentation, my eyes must adjust to take-in the van Gogh brothers' simple, ivy-shrouded plot, with its twin, white-concrete headstones marked with names, dates and "*Ici repose.*" Their grave is as ashes-and-dust lowly looking as those belonging to the surrounding, well nobodies. I find it heartbreakingly lovely.

Given the fame of such illustrious residents as the van Gogh brothers, it's amazing how the cemetery, indeed the entire town of Auvers retains the quiet country charm of ancient stone storefronts, cobbled walks, and cottages built in bygone days that, even now, centuries later, look much the same as they did when van Gogh painted them. As he said: "There are many villas and various modern bourgeois dwelling houses, very radiant and sunny and covered with flowers." And added: "There is much well-being in the air."

The garden of the home and atelier of artist Charles-François Daubigny (1817-1878), for instance, retains the resplendence of *Daubigny's Garden* (1890), van Gogh's evocative nod to lush lawn, pink roses and yellow linden. Here, Daubigny entertained an aged Camille Corot and a young Claude Monet thirty years before van Gogh, then 37 years old, arrived to reside in the cramped attic room of the auberge nearby – the 37th of the various homes he occupied in the Netherlands, Belgium, England and France.

Auvers may be considered a suburb of Paris and fringed by both housing projects and commuter traffic, but the town proper is classic older-world France. My walkabout takes me to Daubigny's home, where I am welcomed by an actual Daubigny descendent (who lives next door) and invited to tour the magical palace of Daubigny's art. The walls of the bedroom once belonging to his daughter, Cécile, are a splendor of scenes he

translated from the tales and fables of Perrault, Grimm and La Fontaine. On the walls of his atelier is a lavishly conceived landscape of Italy's lake district that he (with his son's help) carried out from a vision of Corot. No wonder van Gogh was inspired often to paint the garden of this home: From the fanciful Big Bad Wolf above Cécile's crib to the serene expanse of grass and shade trees outdoors, this sanctuary in the heart of Auvers exudes both life-affirming beauty and the joy of the artistic process. It must have spoken deeply to van Gogh.

As he once wrote to Theo: "Oh, my dear boy, sometimes I know so well what I want. I can very well do without God both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, ill as I am, do without something which is greater than I, which is my life – the power to create."

The Auvers *mairie*. The Auvers wheat fields. The Auvers poppies, acacia blossoms and chestnut trees in bloom. Van Gogh rendered in his work the town's cows, its thatched cottages, its farmhouses, vineyards, haystacks and train. The artist's power to create translated this village's givens into "heartbroken abstractions where image, rhythm, color and texture all come together to express his emotions," in the words of one art critic. And today, those cows and poppies and farmhouses – still here – lend Auvers the veneer of artist's original vision.

Impossible it is, for instance, to visit the home of Dr. Gachet without seeing its former owner as van Gogh does in the melancholic *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (1890). Entrusted to the doctor's care after his year in the asylum in Saint-Rémy, the painter shared a close bond with the redheaded specialist in homeopathy and nervous disorders.

“I have found a true friend in Dr. Gachet,” the artist wrote to his sister Wilhelmina in 1890, “something like another brother, so much do we resemble each other physically and mentally.” Although Dr. Gachet’s portrait shows a man possessing “the heartbroken expression of our time,” as van Gogh once described the work to painter Paul Gaughin, Gachet’s Auvers home is anything but depressing. The tall, white house with red window frames and green shutters, so picturesque it once was painted by Cézanne, was closed for decades and thought by townspeople haunted. I follow the country lane that winds between Daubigny’s house and Gachet’s. A woman on horseback trots by: *Bonjour, Madame*. Soon, I am touring the Gachet’s home’s plain, empty rooms (sans ghosts), and admire van Gogh’s only eau-forte etching of Gachet, that is on display. I can’t help but imagine the doctor at the artist’s deathbed, desperate to save him but being told by the Dutchman, please, don’t bother. “Then it has to be done all over again.” The dying, he meant.

Auvers offers plenty of places in which to perk-up should the gloom of van Gogh’s end get to you. His personal story, of course, is wrenching: Plagued by a genetically influenced epileptic disorder, he suffered constant alternations between aloof withdrawal and overwhelming anger, irritability and dejection, between self-denial and extravagance, religious ecstasy and sinner’s guilt. He tried to exorcize his demons through bizarre acts: he punished himself with fasting, exhaustion, heat and cold, by sleeping uncomfortably on his walking stick and then, by flogging himself with it. When these measures failed, he consoled himself with alcohol and prostitutes. Still. There is the château at Auvers, with its multimedia extravaganza called “Voyage to the Time of

the Impressionists,” and the Musée de l’Absinthe, a museum-homage to the cloudy, aniseed-flavored liqueur said to have been van Gogh’s preferred tippie. Both offer respite from any blues induced by the mental illness that, tragically, frequently dimmed the artist’s incandescent spirit.

That he possessed a sense of his own inner light is undeniable. “You need,” he once wrote Theo, “a certain dash of inspiration, a ray from on high, things not of ourselves, in order to do beautiful things.” He wrote: “In a picture I want to say something comforting as music is comforting. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize.” Clearly, van Gogh’s desire “to express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance,” as he described one study to his brother, did find flashes of fulfillment throughout his difficult life.

“In my opinion,” he told Theo, “I am often rich as Croesus, not in money, but...rich, because I have found in my work something to which I can devote myself heart and soul, and which gives inspiration and significance to life.”

The 17th c. to 18th c. château, while not a lot to look at compared with France’s spectaculars like Versailles or Fontainebleau, is nonetheless a nifty stop for the family-friendly spectacle that brings Paris of the Impressionist period alive – eerily – via headphones, music and techno-wow projections. One minute I’m in the City of Light of the 1860s, dank and dark, with such streets as rue de la Tuerie (“Slaughter Street”); the next I’m in a beautiful, grand café on a wide boulevard that Baron Haussmann conceived in his Second Empire remake of the city – a popular *scène* in Impressionist paintings.

And *then*, I'm standing in the Museum of Absinthe, having been whooshed out of the château, down a few streets and into the 19th c. "bar" by my own eagerness to see it. The mock-up of a saloon of the era displays all things absinthe – special glasses, holed spoons and the like. No sampling is allowed. In 1915 "the green fairy" was banned in France and vilified for supposedly making imbibers as sodden, benumbed and boozy as the woman in *L'Absinthe*, the 1876 painting by Edgar Degas. A bottling revival in the 1990s, however, now permits sealed samples to be sold of the herb-infused liqueur historically drunk during "the green hour" beginning at 5:00 p.m.; the museum offers a small selection.

"If you are well you must be able to live on a bit of bread while you are working all day, and have enough strength to smoke and to drink your whack at night, that's the necessary thing," wrote van Gogh. And "all the same," he added, "to feel the stars and the infinite high and clear above you. Then life is after all almost enchanted."

I have had no whack but here, in Auvers, I do feel the enchantment.

To tour the auberge, the château, the musée and the other town "visits" is, to be sure, an enthrall. But it is not van Gogh's grave or his room or even the pleasant bookshop-boutique in the Auberge Ravoux (considered an historical monument in France) that touches me in quite the way the artist hoped his legacy would. Instead, it is my walk around Auvers that illumines his singular genius as radiantly as he portrayed the heavens of *Starry Night*. Whether it's a cottage jolted electric green in *Farmhouse with Two Figures* (1890), or the brown cows seen crooked-rumped in *Cows* (1890), many views of Auvers today are the very same plastered on the world's countless calendars,

coffee mugs, and tchotchkes; they are the flowers and wheat fields framed on apartment walls; and they are the visual splendors protected by armed guards in museums. Each Auvers view merely awaits, as in his day, van Gogh's transformative vision to make it as dazzling as he did.

I again hike the hill past the church to a wheat field opposite the cemetery. Here, a tastefully mounted reproduction of *Wheat Field with Crows* (1890) marks the spot where, for more than a century, van Gogh is thought to have shot himself. That story now is likely untrue. To gaze upon the same view the painter once did is to see – or at least try – as he did. As he wrote to Theo about the canvas he painted at this place of “...immense expanses of wheat under troubled skies”: “I don't mind trying to convey the sadness, the extreme solitude....” Today's skies are brilliantly blue, and neither sadness nor solitude mars this beautiful view of Auvers. Even the wheat looks lush, sun-kissed and happy as it hulas in the breeze. All around town similar, discreetly displayed reproductions of van Gogh's work are poised so that one seems to stand where he stood – he, with his brushes and palette in hand – and understand how and why he was inspired – on the *Bank of the Oise* (1890) perhaps, or along a *Village Street in Auvers* (1890). As he wrote: “It is so beautiful here if one has only an open and simple eye with few beams in it. But if one has that, it is beautiful everywhere.”

“I do not have great plans for the future,” he wrote to Theo. “If for a moment I feel rising within me the desire for a life without care, for prosperity, each time I go fondly back to the trouble and the cares, to a life full of hardship, and I think: it is better

so, I learn more from it, it does not degrade me, this is not the road on which one perishes.”

Among the roads of Auvers-sur-Oise, van Gogh allowed his life – his cherished power to create – to thrive. Deeply he felt, and tenderly, toward the town and its people, its cows and its cottages.

How wonderful it is for this special place to have been so loved.

HOW I GOT MY OH-LA-LA

By most accounts, I look okay. My style, such as it is, mainly impresses the world with a mild, *she's nice*. Yet I had been in Paris mere weeks when Madame de Glasse, the French neighbor with whom I am friendly, announced some startling news. As we chatted in the launderette we both use on the rue de Passy, Madame eyed a washer's soggy wad of pajamas, long johns, turtlenecks and sweats I had plopped into a rolling basket. Then she said with some alarm, "Mademoiselle," she said. "Like many Americans, you are a prude, *non?*"

Moi? I stared at her, shocked.

True, Madame's wash was a jambalaya of plunging necklines, peek-a-boo intimates and colors the heart-racing hues of passion. There were lace bits and sheer slips and things that looked short and clingy. But who would have thought that what passes for hot where I come from – a whole sack of comfy stuff snapped up for a song at an outlet – would be seen by Madame de Glasse (if not all of France) as symptomatic of a horrible American malady: dowdiness. And I had it!

Was my frumpiness so far gone that nothing could be done? I squeaked, meekly. Suddenly, I was insecure in my one-size-hides-all hoodie. Madame swept a sorrowful look over the laundry I loaded into the dryer – a hefty cotton jogbra and the shame of some unraveling granny panties stood out – and rendered her opinion. I held my breath.

"It is grave, very grave," said Madame de Glasse, with gravity.

I had no idea. Yet my wardrobe of saggy-ass sweats and what's-become-of-me tops certainly contrasted with the outfits fresh from the dryer that Madame de Glasse was folding. Among them: a tiny lime-green thong, a demi-brassiere of transparent lace, and a sweet, sexy skirt no bigger than a wisp. Was it true I had no clue? That the art of feminine fabulousness French women take for granted had shut me out? There I was, roving around Paris in my take on cute – relaxed-fit jeans and U.S. Army tee, while other women, *frump-free* women, were gracing sidewalk cafés in revealing décolleté, clicking down streets in chic kitten heels, or flaunting their flirty figures in tight-fitting everything. Meanwhile, whatever womanly allure I might possess, Madame de Glasse pointed out, was obscured by my prude-wear. My vavavoom was repressed by my unisex dress; my pizzazz, she said, was hidden far, far beneath the sorry fact I did not, it seems, act French.

“What makes French girls as serenely self-satisfied as purring cats...and catnip to the men who admire them? asked Debra Ollivier, author of *Entre Nous – A Woman’s Guide to Finding Her Inner French Girl*. I wondered! “The stereotypical French girl,” she said, “is often insolently thin, casually chic, and fashionable despite a simple wardrobe. With or without makeup she is always put together and utterly self-confident, imbued with natural elegance and an elusive distance that is particularly, maddeningly French.” I guessed such a woman would not be caught in a jogbra. *Especially* dead.

“*Chérie? Chérie?*” It was Madame de Glasse, interrupting my reverie in a chirpy tone altogether more cheerful than that she used over my giant, white panties. “To change the subject,” she said, “have you been to that new gym at Beaubourg?” She

meant Espace Vit'Halles at the Pompidou Center. "It is *trés flash*," she said. "Make a visit and tell me of your adventure."

"Yes, yes, I will; *au revoir* Madame de Glasse." I scuttled my uptight self out of the launderette as fast as my heavy duffle of now shameful frump's-clothes allowed. *The French girl understands that sexy is a state of mind*, maintained Ollivier. Sexy is a state of mind...sexy is a state of mind.... Back at my apartment, I pondered this pearl and dressed for bed in the tee-shirt, tights and full-body nightie the frigid night demanded. Surely Madame de Glasse, in my place, would not don her tiny lime-green thong and a babydoll peignoir! Then again, maybe she would. After all, such a get-up would guarantee she'd have a Frenchman keeping her far warmer than floor-length flannel ever could. If this wasn't reason enough to find my inner French girl, I didn't know what was.

"One is not born a woman," said author/philosopher Simone de Beauvoir; "rather, one becomes a woman." Now, there's a girl who sounds in touch with hers. Simone had a leg up, of course: she was, already, French. But still: her words gave me hope. If I were not born a woman who is catnip, perhaps I could become a sort of cat's meow – a woman so Frenchly serene and purring with self-approval that my laundry would tell of a total transformation. Hide my thighs? Disguise my derriere? Tent my tummy? Ha! No longer. My new dare-to-bare wardrobe of trim, tiny things would be as peek-a-boo as what have you. They would declare to Madame de Glasse, for one, that American shame has no place in my life now that my inner French girl is driving. No doubt she'll be dressed in something more form-fitting and flirty than my usual at-home outfit: the

frump-o-wonderful caftan that Madame de Glasse surely would find more” burka” than “babe”.

Then again, what would it take to achieve such body confidence? Such feminine self-acceptance? If only I could feel, as the French say, “*bien dans sa peau*” – good in one’s skin. When American novelist Edith Wharton traveled to France in 1919, she observed that the French were “puzzled by our queer fear of our own bodies.” So, I reasoned, my queer fear might be the cultural baggage of generations. But really, in these enlightened days? It was silly. Time to let it go. In the meantime, might as well try the new gym.

* * *

Day 1. The instant I entered Espace Vit’Halles, a friendly monsieur at the front desk bid me a big, grinning welcome. Yoga, dance aerobics, weights – I was encouraged to profit from them all. “The ladies’ changing room is on the second floor, Madame,” he said, and shooed me in the approximate direction. I found the door, clearly marked “Femmes,” and entered a sanctuary of sensual splendor. Lovely lavender décor; chaise longues lined up for lounging; flowers blooming on the mirrored vanities: the room was a swoon of comfort and beauty. Showcased under spotlights, a hot tub as vast and artfully conceived as ancient Roman baths bid welcome. Such luxury. Such pampering! The gym-women who showered or soaked or otherwise performed their *toilettes* in various stages of undress flaunted their inner French girls exactly as Ollivier claimed. Women sinewy and women plump, women with goddesses’ bodies and women with pocks and spots and skin that looked anything but good to be in: All got in and out of underwear

that wasn't underwear at all, but rather, lingerie. There it all was, France's finest: lacy, racy and for sure, sensational. These confections, no doubt expensive, were also, let's face it: frightening. How would I ever undress in the presence of women so adept in the provocative art of underwear? Some of the self-satisfied purring cats of the changing room paraded...no, *swaggered* around naked. And down to their brazenly exposed French toes they seemed shame-free. If I were to strip to my big dowdy whities before their eyes, what then? *So queer!* I feared they'd exclaim. *An American prude. Doesn't like to be nude.*

I was in luck. There was a toilet stall that could serve as a personal changing *cabine*. My strictly utilitarian bra sans lace, plunge, pads, push-up, or the least suggestion of seduction could be kept secret. I scuttled in, did my business and emerged dressed in workout-wear. Ta dum! Embarrassment deflected. I headed for the exit and dance aerobic class, but stopped dead when I heard a bit of catnip call.

"Oh, Madame! Madame!" I turned to see a raven-haired, hipless thing holding aloft my favorite faded cut-offs – the shorts that for a good 30 years now, I have found charming on me. "You dropped your...your..." She did not have words for what they were. But her sweet, sad smile and pitying tone told me all that Inès de la Fressange already had:

"No *Parisienne* would dress mutton as lamb."

The ex-runway model and French fashion guru put this rule in her *Parisian Chic: A Style Guide* to let me know *in advance* of coming to France that shorts, like miniskirts, have no business on any woman older than...young.

“*Merci beaucoup, Madame,*” I said, sheepish. I waited until she pranced off, pert ponytail swinging, and tossed my past into the trash. *Mutton?!*

Day 2. “*Bonjour, Madame,*” said the grinning monsieur when I returned to try the gym’s yoga. “The ladies’ changing room is on the first floor. Enjoy your class.” *That’s odd,* I thought. Wasn’t the ladies’ changing room just yesterday on Floor 2? Yet on the first floor, as promised, there it was, the door marked “Femmes.” I entered and saw at once all *was* odd. Where was the lavender? Where was the lovely? Loaded with lockers, lacking a hot tub, the room was dim, dank, and functional. Testosterone chose the décor so sweat stains didn’t show, and from the télé turned to sports to the vanities equipped with manly-looking man-things used by grooming men, this changing room clearly was meant for well, men.

And yet, there they were: Women. The *Parsiennes* flaunted their inner French girls like they had the day before; they paraded around queer-fear-free in brassieres like pasties and thongs if not sheer then small. Awfully.

“*Entrez, Madame,*” said one, as I lingered at the door. The French girl had just contorted herself into a contraption of an electric-blue bustier, a towel on her head. “*Oui, oui, Madame, come in. You’ve found the right place.*” I wasn’t so sure. No toilet stall announced itself after my first look around, so I would have to strip and change into yoga clothes in full view of a man-cave full of catnip. My priggish panties! My not-hot bra! Never mind. This wasn’t anything some serious French lingerie acquisition couldn’t fix. Plus, it was no lace off *their* merry widows if, in front of the Frenchwomen, I got naked like the place had caught fire and I had better move fast or die. Which is how I did. But

in the process? It was astonishing. There I was, whipping off my clothes and slipping into Spandex, and nary a glance went to my uncomely undies. I was a blur, sure. But snug in their absolute disinterest, smug in their elusive distance, the Frenchwomen paid my flash of breast and briefly bared behind no mind. Whatsoever. *Wow, self-satisfaction must be catching.* In the presence of such total nonchalance, I felt for one wild, nude moment...well, nude! It was awesome. I wanted more of it.

Day 3. I arrived at Espace Vit'Halles, today to try the weight room. "*Bonjour,*" bid the big-grinned monsieur, as expected. He then directed me to the ladies' changing room...on the second floor. The second floor? Seriously? Yes. The door marked "Femmes" had moved from the man-cave back upstairs; it opened again on the lovely lavender space filled with Frenchwomen changing.

Encouraged by my undressing success of the previous day, I was shy but excited to unveil my treasures. I had gone shopping. At the lingerie shop on boulevard Haussmann, I could find nothing frumpy whatsoever in a French granny panty; neither was there a single serviceable bra that would just do the job – as if such things in Paris existed. So standing before the display of wares both naughty and nice, a woman I didn't know spoke up.

"I'll take the panties in slinky pink with their matching bra of ruffles and bows – yes, those," she told the shop's assistant. I was stunned to discover it was I, myself, not just speaking but also pointing to items so cute that even Mademoiselle had to approve – endowed as she was with come-hither hips and considerable cleavage. This choice was

so surprising that it meant only one thing. There *was* a French girl in me – in me! – and she had been roused by ruffles.

Back at the gym I beheld this bold foreigner with cool suspicion and moved to the farthest corner of the changing room. There, I could undress apart from the purring cats and expose my newly-purchased pizzazz in relative privacy. I claimed a locker and settled-in on a bench. My queer American fears still lingered, but my new French bra of unabashed vavavoom? It almost busted out of my blouse to shout *Here I am!* And how my slinky pink French panties were pleased to sashay free of my jeans with a little wiggle of joy. Just then, the door. A man announced himself.

“*Bonjour, Mesdames,*” he announced. “*Pardonnez-moi.*” He begged everyone’s pardon for the disturbance, but he was the plumber, he said, come to the ladies’ changing room to solve the problem of the leaky sink. Beside him laden with tools and balancing a ladder stood his apprentice son; he looked about 21. The changing ladies in the buff, or in some version thereof...well, did they shriek or run or faint or cover-up? No. “*Bonjour Messieurs,*” they said, entirely nonplussed. The plumber and his son then passed through the friendly throng, clattering wrenches and whatnot. As they passed they muttered their manners, *pardon, Madame...pardon, Madame, pardon.* And the Frenchwomen stepped out of panties and shucked brassieres; they shimmied into shape-wear and stripped out of slips. *Plumbers?* Any one of them might have said. *So?*

Clad only in my new slinky pinks, I heard a “*Pardon, Madame*” so close it had to be directed to me. I froze.

Moi? I turned to stare at the hovering plumber, in shock.

Yes, he meant me. I was blocking the way to the sink, which, he indicated with his whatnot, stood directly ahead in my corner. Leaking. The plumber's son scooped by with his ladder and tipped his hat, "*Bonjour, Madame.*" Then the two, clattering, set-up shop on the bench closest to mine. The most miserable of moments arrived. I wondered: Did Edith Wharton ever have a queer fear of *her* naked self? If so, what protocol did she suggest for the presence of French plumbers when one has stripped down to intimates – silk bits that are the next thing to go?

"First of all," she once said, "the Frenchwoman is, in nearly all respects, as different as possible from the average American woman...The Frenchwoman is *grown-up*. Compared with the women of France, the American woman is still in the kindergarten."

What Wharton would say: *Oh grow-up*. If I didn't remove my slinky pink things without an ounce of shame, I would never make it to first grade. Really, what were the plumber and his son to me, except perhaps plumbers? In that flash of nudity between underwear off and workout-wear on, what harm could they cause in the midst of the changing room's entire *colony* of nonplussed nudes? On the count of...three: There I went. I squeezed my eyes closed and off with the ruffles, out of all bows. But I didn't even have to peek to know. My raw glory garnered less interest than a drip. The men, both bent over the sink and fiddling with a wrench, looked up at me and back at the leak like, *her? Her who?*

"There is in France a kind of collective, cultural shrug about nakedness," Ollivier said, said. Edith Wharton agreed: "The French," she said, "are accustomed to relating

openly and unapologetically the anecdotes that Anglo-Saxons snicker over privately and with apologies.”

I’m sorry, but the plumbers’ total disinterest in my body bare left me giggly with a secret, newfound freedom. Just think! Frump or no, I could flaunt my feminine fixtures and ask for nothing in the way of drama. Then, the plumber’s son looked up, caught my eye, and winked.

Oh.

Day 4. When I arrived to attend class in Pilates, the ever-friendly monsieur said the usual *Bonjour, Madame* and directed me to the ladies’ changing room – on the first floor.

“But Monsieur!” I cried, by now perturbed. “Why does the ladies’ changing room keep changing?” Second floor, first floor; first floor, second. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s the hot tub, Madame. The men’s changing room does not have one, so it’s only *juste* that the men are given the opportunity to use to use the ladies’ tub from the time to time, *non?*”

It made perfect sense.

“*Merci, Monsieur,*” I said. Today the ladies would change in the man-cave, so I found the first-floor door marked “Femmes” and entered. Empty. No purring cat so far had arrived. I claimed a sweet spot on the most spacious bench, flipped open a locker and proceeded to undress. Proud, yes *proud* I was to strip to my second shopping score – a brand-new sheer-lace brassiere and panties frilled in fancy fringe. Both were so pretty they should have been strolling the Champs Elysees. *Too bad no one’s around to*

appreciate them. Nevertheless, off they went so I could shimmy into the tight body stocking I wore for Pilates.

Just then, the door.

Too late to run, too late to hide; I thought for sure I was about to die. In they came, like kids let out for recess – a rambunctious bunch of buddies with gym bags over their shoulders. I stood stark naked, front and center, as the men bounded in and saw me. How could they not? Tied to the stake of shame, I burned to a shade of true prude pink and felt my inner American frump demand a good explanation.

Didn't these men see the door marked "Femmes"?

Didn't Monsieur at the desk think to direct them?

The herd dispersed around me, the men claiming lockers and dropping their gym bags on benches.

"*Bonjour, Madame.*" It was the one whose bag landed closest to mine, and whose hunky, handsome self took a seat not three feet distant.

"*Bonjour, Madame.*" It was the next, who scooted past to stake his spot before the télé turned to a game of soccer.

"*Bonjour, Madame.*"

"*Bonjour, Madame.*"

"*Bonjour, Madame.*"

Too nude to speak, I could only nod my *Bonjour Messieurs* in reply. If only I had dabbed on a drop of Chanel No. 5! As the legendary Coco herself once said: "A woman who doesn't wear perfume has no future." Then again, it hardly mattered if I had been

scented by irresistibility itself. To the stripping Frenchmen, who soon had the place bustling with their good-natured fun, I was simply the naked woman among them who didn't get the message.

Désolé, said the front desk monsieur later, begging my pardon for his oversight. The ladies' changing room today was on the *second* floor and he didn't think to switch the door-signs until after I had arrived. Meanwhile, in the midst of men as blasé as the plumbers about the exposure indecent to me for too long, I felt a queer thing – not fear – come to life. Could it be? Ah, *oui*. My inner French girl.

My body as is, just is. The idea delighted me. Since not a soul in the City of Light judged it lacking, since the people of Paris paid it no mind, why did I try so hard to hide it? To deny it?

Bring on the satin contraptions, France. I'm coming out.

“*Pardon? Madame?*” The Frenchman sharing my bench brought my attention to the fancy-fringed panties that lay on the floor between us like an unspoken question. I had flung them into the locked but missed. Who would pick them up? *Oh my God!* I lunged and snapped and swooped them into my bag. I may have been wrong, but was that the smallest flicker of a wicked smile?

“*Très belle,*” he said. I dared to believe he meant not the panties but me.

* * *

At the launderette on the rue de Passy, Madame de Glasse stood with me at the folding table and eyed my neat stacks of items surely even Chanel had in mind. “A girl should be two things,” she said: “classy and fabulous.” Then Madame said with some

surprise, “Mademoiselle,” she said, “like many Americans who come to Paris, you have gotten over your problem, *non?*”

Yes. Now I’ve got my oh-la-la. And, oh, how even the plumbers of Paris would be proud.

LUNCHEON OF THE O'CONNOR PARTY

“This way, please, Mesdames, Monsieur.” I scoot along behind the maitre d’, who’s moving fast. *Vite, vite, step quickly* – before the crush of lunchtime crowd separates us and I fail to follow the way to the table – *the* table – around which Aline, Alphonse, Jeanne and Gustave, plus ten others, once gathered to dazzle the world.

“*Alors.*” He eventually stops and pivots to present chairs and menus to my parents and me. “*Bon appétit,*” he says and we sit like we’ve blown in on the wind and can’t yet understand where we are, *who* we are, what we’re doing or why. Dad looks dazed, Mom stupefied. *My God*, I manage to capture a thought among the blurry whirl of them in my mind. *This is the exact table.* We are seated at the very restaurant table that figures front and center in *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, Renoir’s 1881 painting that today is housed in the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. Here we are, dazed and disbelieving, on the outdoor terrace at the Restaurant Fournaise in the town of Chatou, just outside Paris. The river Seine flows sun-starry below and the other lunching parties, more blasé, eat platters of crustaceans, drink *coupes* of Champagne and seem less fazed by the fact Pierre-Auguste Renoir – *the* Renoir – in eight Sunday sittings arranged his friends around a table exactly like ours, placed in this precise spot, and painted them to express, he said, “the goodness of life.” *Le Déjeuner des Canotiers*, his masterpiece, is said to represent a new direction in Impressionism, as well as a French society with heaps more *joie de vivre* than was found before the Industrial Revolution. Its richness of form, fluidity of brushstroke and stunning play of light are pure Renoir. As he said: “To my

mind a picture should be something pleasant, cheerful and pretty. Yes, pretty! There are too many unpleasant things in life as it is without creating still more of them.”

We come somewhat to, at least enough to order a demi-carafe of house wine, and take in our surroundings. Later, I compare them to the painting and am amazed at how little has changed since the 1880s, when Renoir sold his sumptuous view of *la vie moderne* to Paris art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. Ruel’s son in 1923 sold it (for \$125,000) to American Duncan Phillips, who placed it in his personal collection of treasures by van Gogh, Degas, Matisse and other “modern” artists. Today it is valued at millions. Here, looking so very like the painting, is the simple shaded balcony of La Maison Fournaise, a Seine-side boatworks/restaurant with scenic river views that even still is run by the Fournaise family. Nothing fancy for tables and chairs. Above is the all-important striped awning that Renoir, overjoyed, discovered gave his canvas crowded with people the composition that he, during weeks of feverish work, feared it lacked. Even the wine glasses, once they are plopped before us by a brisk, bustling waiter, refract dancing flecks of sunlight – the very light that dazzles the eye on “our” white-clothed table in the artwork.

“Have you ever felt you are a painting come to life?” Mom, possibly knowing Renoir wanted “pleasant,” “cheerful” and “pretty,” re-fastens some flyaway hair and fixes her mouth – now it’s a bigger, more obvious smile.

“I know!” I am sitting in the very spot once occupied by Aline Charigot. In the painting she sits nose-to-snout with a wiry, little dog she appears to sweet-talk. Pretty in

a flowered hat with a flounce of ruffles at her throat, Renoir's future wife appears in *Luncheon of the Boating Party* in a splendor of glowing femininity.

“It's with my brush I make love,” the artist famously said. And I, seated in Aline's chair, alas sans dog, almost feel his eyes on me from behind the easel once set-up just across the terrace – there, next to the sideboard that today holds tantalizing desserts: Tarte Tatin, dark chocolate cake, a sugared something swimming in crème Anglaise. I imagine him, tense with concentration, appraising my every feature and flaw. These he would have daubed onto the canvas crossed with “a little mystery, some vagueness, [and] some fantasy” – as he said a true work of art required. He said: “I like a painting which makes me want to stroll in it, if it is a landscape, or to stroke a breast or a back, if it is a figure.” If only I gave off glow like Aline! She shimmers at the hand of Renoir, as does actress Angèle Legault, another model who posed for him by sitting – at our table – and inclining her comely head to flirt with a man standing over her. True, I'm a bit sweaty with the excitement of being at Restaurant Fournaise on an over-warm day, but I don't know if I can call it glow, don't know if I ooze the what have you that invites strokes. Still, if Mom can oomph her “pretty” by sitting for Renoir – granted, he's not here *now*, but the familiarity of the scene makes it feel as if he could be – then I can oomph my figure to make a better impression. I un-slump, sit up, smile.

At Restaurant Fournaise, the food is very French: Rabbit terrine, steak *au poivre*. For those not red-meat aficionados, this means limited ordering options. Unless...well, unless an entire cheese course, plus bread and dessert, can count as lunch. When can't they! Mom and Dad both order the *gratin* of salmon cooked in Champagne and I, an

exquisite selection of France's best *fromage*. We all gaze upon the Seine. This sunny Sunday sees boaters boating to and fro; rowing sculls; sailing skiffs, sloops and yachts and yawls – all form a lunchtime show I suspect is not *that* unchanged, these centuries later, from that which gave Renoir the characters for his painting. In this scene, said by the artist to be his “happiest,” French *canotiers* in classic flat-topped straw boaters join women in flouncy frocks and festive hats for feasting and flirting and a day of repose on the Seine. The luncheon table – our table – is made sensually decadent with bottles of wine and a centerpiece spilling fat fruit. The women are rendered red-lipped, plump-cheeked, and kissable. The men, with the exception of a background gentleman in a formal top hat, another in a bowler, look to be just off the river; their undershirts are even damp with the sweat of their rowing. Gustave Caillebotte, the wealthy Renoir patron, appears in the right foreground as a boatman bursting with well being; he sits backwards on his chair like the wine is gone and, *oh la la*, hasn't lunch been fun? Besides an Impressionist artist in his own right, Caillebotte was an avid, if competitive, boatman. One of his sleek racing sculls today is on display outside the Restaurant Fournaise. In my mind's eye I see him now in the river below us, row-row-rowing his boat fiercely down the Seine.

“I can't paint if it doesn't amuse me,” Renoir said. His *Luncheon* scene of figures free of even one brow furrow of worry suggests he saw his models exuding a mood of relaxed frivolity. The party at the table – our table – must have caused him jollity. I wonder: Would the artist have had any ha-has over us? As we peruse the menu, here's Dad, suddenly stricken by an allergy attack. There is sneezing, snuffling, itching of his

reddening, weepy eyes. “I’m so sorry,” he says. “What the hell is growing around here?” Green and wild and gorgeous, the riverbank below our terrace table reminds me that Chatou, though nine miles northwest of the Eiffel Tower, is not Paris. A morning train from the City of Light dropped us here today in only 20 minutes, but we are, yes, in something of the country. Renoir apparently loved this city-close escape and his friends the Fournaise family.

“There isn’t a lovelier place in all Paris surroundings,” he said. He proved his ardor by painting no less than 30 of his most stunning works using Chatou settings. To wit: *Portrait of Alphonsine Fournaise* (1879), the Fournaise daughter who suffered an unrequited love for Renoir, and *La Grenoillère* (1869). He said: “You could find me anytime at Fournaise’s. There, I was fortunate enough to find as many splendid creatures as I could possibly desire to paint.” Today, many of the pleasures that wooed Renoir remain. No server, for instance, is rushing us to eat and be off. My desire to stand and snap photos of us enjoying ourselves (Renoir’s “boating party” sat here!) is met with encouraging smiles from fellow diners. Should we order nothing but lunch, if that, it seems we could loll all afternoon at this famous table until we felt as plump with languor and sun as a happy country plum. Might as well. We will then be ripe for Renoir.

“My purpose in life,” he said, “has always been to paint people as if they were beautiful fruit.”

Mom’s and Dad’s dishes and my cheese plate arrive. Delicious. The swoony, satisfied pleasure I feel from a meal of French favorites – Comté and Cantal and Brie – is precisely “the good life” Renoir wished to evoke in *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. That,

and “the painting of love, and the love of painting,” in the words of one art critic. *Show me more love, Boursault, and I’ll exude a mood worthy of Renoir’s brush!*

Then again, I best not become a creature *too* splendid, like the female *Luncheon* models who Renoir renders looking totally in love with the day, the life, one another – and him. True, the women in the painting are former, future and wanna-be lovers of the artist, women who agreed to pose for him for pay, knowing he really preferred to paint them naked.

“I look at a nude,” Renoir once explained. “There are myriads of tiny tints. I must find the ones that will make the flesh on my canvas live and quiver.” To live and quiver for Renoir, however, might find one sharing a questionable intimacy. As he said: “I can’t see myself going to bed with,” say, “a lawyer.” And this: “I like women best when they don’t know how to read, and when they wipe their babies’ bottoms themselves.” The artist’s preference for illiterate lovelies is one thing; the bitter feelings that fired him up to paint *Luncheon of the Boating Party* are another. In 1880 author Emile Zola cut the artist to the quick with a comment offensive to all emerging Impressionists. “They show their works while incomplete, illogical, [and] exaggerated,” he decried in a popular journal of the day – words that had power, influence and may have convinced Renoir of the dangers of reading. Zola dared the rogue band of art upstarts – Monet, Pissarro, Sisley and Cézanne, among them – to exhibit more complete, more *complicated* paintings in the prestigious *Salon des Arts*, the snooty show that told the world which artists had – and had not – arrived. Lore holds Renoir conceived *Le Déjeuner des Canotiers* just to show Zola he could rise to the occasion. A complication

of shape, space, color, texture and composition, the painting took six months to complete. In its day it was a radical mélange of still life, landscape, portraiture and genre. *Ha!* Renoir likely thought when cleaning up his brushes and palette. *I'm among a "sloppy, self-satisfied group of forerunners inferior to what they undertake?" Eat your words, Monsieur Zola!*

Here on the terrace of Restaurant Fournaise, it looks certain the artist had all he desired to feel inspired. "I need to feel the excitement of life stirring around me," he said. Mom is certainly stirring; Dad is, too. For all our unbothered lolling, we nonetheless are fidgety to get on with dessert and an after-lunch tour of the small museum attached to the restaurant. There, in the Musée Fournaise, boating life and the 19th c. golden era of the Seine are extolled in gauzy, romanticized river scenes by such painters as Adrien Karbowsky and Maurice Catinat. *Who?* Exactly. These artists may lack Renoir's star power, but still: the diversion is interesting enough that we want our waiter to remember our table – this is, after all, *the* table – and return to offer coffee and dessert. So far, his easy, leisurely way of allowing us to linger over lunch feels very *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. It's like we are Renoir's models themselves, sitting hour upon hour...upon hour; we feel almost forbidden to move a muscle for fear there will be a flub of the line of Mom's sloping nose or a botch of the tone of Dad's flushed skin in the sun.

"Paint with joy!" the artist said – "With the same joy that you would make love to a woman." I feel Renoir's eyes on me as I take a napkin to the vinaigrette grease-spot I see, sad to say, splattered on my sweater – at my left breast. Would he have found this move seductive? Would my billowing American buttocks, flowing beyond the edges of

the bitty French chair on which I sit, purr to him, *Paint me, you fool?* Renoir was indeed the artist who said, “When I paint a woman’s bottom so that I want to touch it, then the painting is finished.” But *this* bottom?

I best sit at some better advantage – cross my legs like a lady, perhaps. The moment I do, a miracle: The waiter at last appears. It’s the crème brulée for Mom, the Tarte Tatin for Dad; I choose two *boules* of strawberry sorbet. *Oui, Mesdames, Monsieur.* The waiter whisks off and we again are left to consider how our table – how we – figure into the genius that was Renoir.

Among the artist’s contemporaries like Monet, Cézanne, Marisot, and Caillebotte, he is considered the only “pure Impressionist.” In *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, this honor is understood well in the women who once sat where we now sit – they, who once sweet-talked a dog, charmed a monsieur, glowed with the good life. “One cannot imagine these women, as they are, having been painted by anybody else,” said French art critic Théodore Duret, a booster of Impressionism at its debut. “They have the free and easy manners one would expect of young women who have lunched and are enjoying themselves with a group of young men, but they also have that graciousness, that roguish charm, which Renoir alone could give to women.”

Here at Restaurant Fournaise, I check my own graciousness and find it wants what they were so blessed to get. A single *boule* of sorbet would have been fine and really, an entire cheese course to myself? Glutton-free and fabulous – could Renoir make me that? I test my own roguish charm. To get the waiter’s attention yet again – this time we’d like the check – I cock my head to be coy like Angéle. I purse my lips into a dog-

kissing coo – à la Aline. I make my gaze soft and starry-eyed like Alphonsine’s. Her unrequited love for Renoir oozes from *Luncheon of the Boating Party* with such obviousness. How tragic. Didn’t he see? I, meanwhile, am oozing whatever I can to enchant the waiter. He is at the far end of the restaurant and as oblivious to our table as Renoir was to the young Mademoiselle Fournaise mooning over him as he painted.

“What are you doing?” Mom unfixes her smile.

“What?”

“Why are you acting so weird?”

“What do you mean?” In Renoir’s painting, a hat-wearing lady in brown is attended to – attentively – by two clearly devoted and doting bearded men. The arm of one clasps her around the waist in an affectionate-looking squeeze. Her hands cover her ears for reasons unknown. Perhaps this is some secret signal of women skilled in attracting male attention. I let my hands fly up to mine.

It works. The waiter hurries to our table from clear across the terrace. He looks perturbed.

“Madame?” he says. “*Ça va?*” He wants to know if I’m all right. Indeed I am!

“*L’addition, s’il vous plait.*” The waiter gives me a *what’s the hurry* face, but between my coo-lips, starry-eyes, cocked-coy head and flown-up hands he guesses *something* means it’s time for us to leave and so returns right away with the check.

I feel Renoir’s eyes on us as we gather ourselves, stand and abandon our table – *the table* – to the next luncheon party. We exit via the spot where Renoir’s easel stood. I imagine it holds a canvas of our antics at Restaurant Fournaise. I wonder: Would a

scene of Dad mid-sneeze, Mom tamping down her flyaway hair, and I mopping my left breast see its way into the Phillips Collection? As Renoir himself once said, “Nowadays they want to explain everything. But if they could explain a picture, it wouldn’t be art.” I like to think of us, in our inexplicable way, as art. We have lunched here, as Renoir’s boating party once lunched. We have admired the Seine as they once admired it. We have enjoyed the day as they surely had. This indeed is “the good life” Renoir had in mind.

“Shall I tell you what I think are the two qualities of art?” he once asked. *Please do.* “It must be indescribable and it must be inimitable....The work of art must seize upon you, wrap you up in itself, carry you along.” Which describes precisely our *Luncheon of the O’Connor Party* – an afternoon at the Restaurant Fournaise that swept us up into Renoir’s art and left me, for one, better off.

Now I can coo for any camera on cue.

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER...NEVER AGAIN?

Madame P. is coming to dinner. A real American meal is on the menu and Madame P. has never been to America. This lifelong Marseille housewife is as pure a product of Provence as hot sun, a blaze of blue sky, and the insistent winds of the Mistral. Which is to say, by virtue of her inborn oneness with aioli and the Niçoise olive, she is a veritable terror with a steak tartare, a true *enfant terrible* with ratatouille. Yes, Madame P. is so accomplished a cook in the renown French school of lip-smacking, hip-sticking meals of gastronomic awesomeness, that I fear for the dinner party we have planned, my mother, sister and I, to welcome her into the family.

Soon her son, Bruno, will marry my sister, Candice, and it will be time to for us to head home to California after an amazing vacation year in France making fast friends with the country's ancient traditions *à table* and ageless romance with eating. Yet tonight if we fail to wow Madame P. with our own culinary prowess, the evening may turn out to be another glaring reason why Americans, as Bruno once confessed his mother had said, seem to her as cultured as a Coney Island corn dog. Worse, any hopes Candice may have of being accepted, even respected, as a proper wife for Madame P.'s only pampered son actually might collapse. Bruno himself is no flunkie with a flambé, and Candice? Well, if she proves to promise a future of Ding Dongs, say, for dinner, it will be a situation as grave as if we were speaking of Madame P.'s famous cheese soufflés – which will go flat over her dead body.

Better our party be peppy, impressive and presented to perfection, we knew, and so invited Madame P. in a fever of nervous enthusiasm. The menu, we wanted to tell her but didn't to maintain the surprise, would feature America's finest culinary delights. It would be an authentic Fourth of July picnic (our inspired idea) with crispy fried chicken, corn on the cob, and all the sides that thrill Americans' palates as passionately as baguettes and Brie bowl over the French. We kept mum on the details but the meal would be yummy, we assured her, and fun.

Madame P.'s face clouded with vague apprehension at the mention of a meal soup-to-nuts American. But tonight when we open the door of our sixth floor Paris apartment and she stands there wheezing, her smile is brave and bright.

"*Bonsoir,*" she says, after hoisting her heft and perhaps her dread up five flights of steep, spiral stairs. She has arrived under protection of a hulking 10-pound box of fancy beribboned chocolates, which she clenches to her chest; it is some minutes before she relaxes her grip to offer it. "I did not make these myself," she apologizes. Her flush of shame reveals that, for a woman renown around Marseille for hand-fashioning her own truffles (wouldn't you know), a visit to the *confiserie*, or candy shop, is a major Madame P. faux pas.

"*Merci,*" I trill and take the box. In our itchy-bitsy toile-papered foyer we peck cheeks hello in the French fashion – two pecks per person, except if you're family, in which case it's three. We each double-peck Madame P. for tonight, alas, we are not – yet. Fingers, however, are crossed.

“Ah, *bonsoir Madame!*” welcomes Mom, flourishing the full extent of her French.

“Ah, good even-eeeng, Madame!” says our guest, arriving at the outermost boundary of her English.

The two have thus exhausted all possible talk between them for the evening, so are left to inspect one another with the cool, uncompromising eye Provincial housewives typically take to market to train on dead trout on ice. Madame P. appears by far the better buy. Beautifully dressed-to-dine in heels, hose, hat and a heart of gold that glitters at her throat, she briefly eyeballs the leggings and oversized “I ♥ Paris” tee shirt I wear; she glances at the distressed, shred-knee jeans in which Candice is spiffed. When relieved of her hat and coat, the body of Madame P. expels puffs of a delicious perfume. It smells expensively French.

“Come in and please, have a seat,” says Candice and Madame P. sweeps toward the sofa molting whiffs of her scent. With each step she emits a low frequency sound – *swoosh-swoosh, swoosh-swoosh* – that we guess is a slip of fine silk. Madame P. perches on alert at the edge of the sofa, and appears small behind the handbag she parks on her lap like a chic faux crocodile shield. Bulwark against what I can only suppose, though her apprehension, perhaps, is understandable. After all, we are American. Foreigners. People Madame P. probably never dreamed would be a party to Bruno’s defying the P. family tradition that from the dawn of time has decreed its sons and daughters marry those for whom a baguette at every meal is a birthright, a taste for *crème brûlée* is in the blood. People, in short, precisely like the P.s themselves: French.

“Bruno tells me it is completely *fou*, just crazy in the United States,” our guest says suddenly. “A Big Mac at any hour, day or night.” We hear from Bruno that Madame P. is completely *fou* herself for the fast-food fattener, though she’d sooner burn a Béarnaise than admit it, so my sister and I both smile, politely, and think of nothing to say. Suddenly, a high-pitched squeal pierces our pleasantries. Candice ejects from her chair like the cushion’s caught fire. “Oh, the chicken!” she cries as another shriek shatters our civility. These hisses and pops of frying-oil violently spattering sends her bolting for the stove with a face full of fright, and I feel the foreboding of a Fourth of July picnic gone bust: Should the chicken be blackened beyond recognition, it is clear Bruno’s bride-to-be and her kin of nincompoop cooks will appear no more appetizing in Madame P.’s eyes than the sorry old birds we let burn.

Meanwhile, our guest politely declines the Bud Light I offer by pointing to her stomach and explaining in mellifluous French something about something in her something. However, when I place a bowl of Cheez-Its on the table beside her, she raises her penciled brows with interest.

And why not? We are particularly proud of these, for little can Madame P. guess the hardship over which we triumphed to acquire a box of the sumptuous salty squares. Here in Paris they are practically as pricey as truffles; they are considered a commodity as rare. Together with Cap’n Crunch cereal, Sara Lee cheesecake and other all-American standards, they are stocked in a grocery of imported goods so hidden away, so little known, so...*exclusive*, its hours are By Appointment Only.

It was in calling for an appointment weeks earlier that I first knew our dinner party was in peril.

“You may reserve a visit 12 days from today,” said the grocery’s *patron* on the phone, busy and brisk. “And, please, no cancelations!” When appointment day at last arrived and the Métro ride to the unmarked store proved long, hot and complicated, it was all I could do to hold it together. There, in the cheerful, brightly lit grocery they stood: sack after glo-orange sack of Fritos, stack after wonderful stack of Ho Hos. There were Ruffles and Ritz, Twinkies and Twix; Jujubes, Jello and Jolt. Perhaps like many Americans living in France and frankly up to their gullets with baguettes and Brie, I was homesick at heart for my own land’s snacks. I must have been showing the strain of month after month spent starved of even a single spoonful of Skippy to suck, for into my basket they went:

Oreos! Cocoa Puffs! Pringles!

Snickers?

Yes.

It’s-Its?

You bet.

The family-size sack of Chips Ahoy!?

You guessed it: Oh, boy!

The *patron* watched my every move with an expression of profound ennui that said what I to my shame could not: *Beh oui*, it said with a classic Gallic shrug, *what else can we expect with these poor Americans, those who must, while in France, eat French?*

Yes, the flawless flans, the excellent *fromage*, the pommes frites always cooked to perfection – Ack! “Ring these up, too,” I told the *patron*, and slapped six snack-packs of kids’ pudding onto the counter. “*Merci.*”

But, unbelievably, Madame P. dismisses the faux orange bits I chose that day as soon as I swoop the dish into her personal space. “*Non, merci,*” she says and smiles. Seriously? I am hurt and perplexed but quickly remember: Our guest is French after all. Formed from *crème fraiche*, raised on paté, the palate of Madame P. is perhaps a bit...well, *untrained* to appreciate the special thrill of Cheez-Its. But I do and soon scarf the whole bowl with a burp.

“Excuse me,” I say.

“*De rien,*” it’s nothing, says Madame P.

Meanwhile, the dining table beckons with the most wonderful picnic fixings possible. The chicken is crispy, just right; the corn looks sweet – so fine. And the pickles? I can’t help but praise us for our pains. Perfect. We stampede to our places.

“*Bon Appetit!*” Candice toasts and raises her glass. Madame P. reaches for hers, hesitates, then seems to spin around herself a thick cocoon of confusion.

“*Pas du vin?*” No wine? she asks. Her voice is so velvet it is clear she doesn’t wish to be difficult.

Why, this is a picnic! we explain. In our family’s Fourth of July tradition we will instead enjoy cool glasses of puce-colored Kool Aid. In groovy green or appalling purple, it is this special treat that so fondly recalls our favorite outdoor outings. These are the family gatherings past of barbecued hot dogs plucked from the ashes where,

accidentally, they dropped, and the fun Frisbee tosses – into river, treetop or bog. They are the good, good times of Auntie Ann attracting ants with her ribbon-winning coconutty ambrosia, and Grandma Ruth’s deviled eggs, ever a hit with Doby, our drooling bulldog. Like the lemon wedge that bobs happily in my water glass, my heart becomes buoyant with memories.

The buoyancy begins and ends with me, however, for when Madame P. is served a plate she appears– can it be? – bewildered. She studies her dish and there it is: the curiosity. A corn cob wonderfully golden offers itself before her, a fried chicken thigh’s glistening skin beckons nothing less than come hither. Instead of diving in like of course one *would* at such a tempting mealtime tableau, like *we* do, Madame P. pats the table, left; she pats the table, right. She pats and pats, now faster.

“*Pas du couteau? Pas de la fourchette?*” No knife, no fork? she asks. Indeed, there is no knife. There is no fork. And Madame P. has never been to America.

In this moment of culinary crisis I imagine that all Madame P. has to guide her is her past – a lifetime of meals that make sense. Her mother’s comfort *coq au vin*, where the wine-tendered meat always and predictably fell onto...the fork. Her friends’ familiar *poule feuilletée*, with its savory bits of peppered poultry always and forever speared from beneath its puff pastry...with the fork. From the first hens *rôti* of her girlhood to the *poule au pot* she perfected as a bride, every chicken dish of the Marseille housewife’s lifetime has been, I imagine, friendly and non-threatening.

And now this.

Seeking a cue from us, Madame P. at last looks up. And then she appears to understand. Everything.

“Go ahead, pick it up with your fingers, it’s a picnic!” urges Candice, already one corn cob down; its carcass lies ravaged on her plate and butter streaks grease her chin. Mom, meanwhile, sucks a drumstick to the bone in amplified slurps of pleasure. “Yes, yes, with your fingers, like this,” she says, and makes a picking-up gesture. She smiles and reveals the bits of corn stuck to both incisors. Meanwhile, I pack-in a hot biscuit in an ecstatic mouthful of gluttony. Oh, so happy, so happy are we with a meal that is Home Sweet Home! I forget for the moment that corn in France is never eaten on the cob (except by hogs) and chicken, a French religion, is not considered a trifle to pick-up like some cheap *jeune fille* on the street. Our dinner display of finger-licking abandon has to strike Madame P. as a bizarre practice that explains my coming to the table in leggings: Americans are weird.

“Madame P., please eat!” we entreat, all lips now glistening with butter grease, all fingers well sticky with chicken. Our guest instead smiles the kindest of all possible smiles and clicks open her crocodile bag. She fishes for a vial of pills, points to her heart and mentions in melodious French the doctor Somebody’s orders to something-something. But she can’t fool me. I see in her friendly face the discussion she’s having with who I suspect is the Master French Chef of heaven. *Have mercy upon this chicken for they know not what they do!* Her prayer no doubt implores. It may be fricasseed or creamed, if not stewed, baked or rôti, but chicken in every known instance on earth should be eaten with knife and fork.

And as we Americans dig in to the picnic with gusto and jokes and two, no *three* helpings of chicken and biscuits and corn, Madame P. smiles and smiles – too shy, too sick, too shocked or simply too lost to get more down than a few big slugs of Kool-Aid...which she loves.

Candice shoots me a look of woe that says we'll have to return the ring, cancel the caterer and forget the fairytale dress with 10-foot train.

No way.

In 1533 the Italian aristocrat Catherine de Medici brought the first table fork to France upon her marriage to the future King Henry II. It was a move that forever changed – forever *civilized* – the country's dining habits. Could we, Candice's family, be seen by Madame P. as people of the *pre*-Catherine de Medici era? We with our "I ♥ Paris" tourist tee shirts, we with our Cheez-Its addiction? One thing is certain. Our party to woo and win her trust that Bruno is not embarking on a married life of boxed Happy Meals has come off like Uncle Sandy's signature smoked sticky-ribs: plump with picnic promise, but, after forever over-sticking to the grill, in the end gone to the dogs. There will be no rented rhinestone tiara for me, the ex-, now-depressed maid of honor. I reach for yet another buttered biscuit. Why not.

Just then, Madame P. perks up! "*Excusez-moi,*" she says and rises. She dashes to the foyer and returns. "*Et voila, les chocolates!*" Her eyes dance as she bears the candy to the table. In a flash the box is unwrapped, and in a frenzy of unfurling foil, Madame P. – with our help, of course – plows through two full rows of chocolate chews and creams. She is grateful, it seems, that tonight she will not have to go to bed hungry.

And I get my rhinestone tiara.

After a romantic honeymoon on the Côte d'Azur, the newlyweds plan to make their home in the Napa Valley. But there is no need to mail congratulations right away. The happy couple will be delayed due to the wedding gift Madame P. insists they accept – no, really, she insists: For Candice three weeks of cooking school at Le Cordon Bleu.

A COUPE OF THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

San Francisco Bay Area, California

Dad can't hear and Mom can't see – both have backs that pain them. In the night Dad gets up to crash into desk or footstool or dog before he falls; by day Mom almost topples over into the grocery display of specials when bumped by a passing shopper. In the car...I don't want to think of it, Mom or Dad at the wheel. In their early 80s, my parents nonetheless are plenty peppy, considering. They walk, climb stairs and exercise with stretchy bands. They manage to manage despite Dad's progressing hearing loss and Mom's advancing macular degeneration. At their small, shingle home in the Bay Area, the house in which they have lived for 56 years with recurring generations of a raccoon who lives in the attic – they have named it Anne Frank – Mom and Dad act their age. While one scoots along the upstairs hall, too slow to answer the phone before the machine picks it up, the other will poke up the stairs at a pace probably snappy for one in their 80s, but still: you don't want to be behind them in a hurry. Their daily routine is decades down pat – dinner at seven, in bed by nine. And not too much TV! The programs these days are *so stupid*. At their home in the Bay Area, the neighbors will say of my parents, they're so nice, they're so quiet. Why, if it weren't for the burglar alarm that Dad every six months somehow sets off, a drama that causes the police, sirens screaming, to come check things out, you would never know anyone was home.

But home they are.

Here comes Dad, a blur hurtling past on his way from the sofa in front of the football game to the iced tea Mom has waiting in the kitchen. “Here I come!” he says and careens around the coffee table, bumps into the lamp, lifts off the floor and lands, frightening the cat, hard on his “bad” shoulder.

“Ow!” he yelps.

“Balance,” he tells the doctors. “I’m having trouble with my balance. He wants tests; they say, get a cane. No way. He would sooner step in front of a train than admit he’s aging.

There goes Mom, Geisha-like as she serves the iced tea. More and more, her every perfection of service to Dad is tinged with irritation.

“Tom!” she calls. “TOM!” She hates to shout but does, for she knows he won’t hear and she’ll have to repeat. “YOUR TEA.” Her left eye turned dingy brown from the doctor’s cruel tonic weeps and stings and blinks, and her right, hazel the hue of river stones – ever beautiful, her pride – seek out Dad in the living room.

“Darling?” she calls. “DARLING?”

“Goddamnit,” he says and rights himself long enough to travel a zigzag path to the kitchen, where he bumps the table and tips over the tea. “*Goddamnit.*”

“It will only get worse,” Mom assures me. I can’t bring myself to image. At their home in the Bay Area, I will sit upstairs and listen in fear as Dad steps out of the house with the dog, who is straining the leash and eager to *go*.

“I’ll be back.” Dad calls. Will he? He and Pierre-the-terrier out there on life’s road of hazards – potholes, gravel, grease slicks, cars. The thought starts my heart

hammering. Mom, meanwhile, drives off to the market. From behind, it looks like no one's driving. What has happened to her height? But first, she discusses dinner.

“What about pureed celery root?” she suggests. It's one of her favorite French treats.

“Yum” I say.

“We can have that and pureed carrots and pureed potatoes and those wonderful artichokes pureed with crème fraîche.”

“Mom, that sounds like a dinner for people with no teeth.”

She laughs and says that's what they will serve at Twilight Manor – dinner at 4:30 p.m.

“Well in time to be in bed all snuggly by seven,” she says.

When Mom talks about “the home” I know it's only in theory. She doesn't really believe that there she could be, drooling in a wheelchair, parked in the hall. But snuggly in bed by 7:00 p.m. after a few spoonfuls of puree is more and more appealing to her, especially if the puree is pea and the prospect of having someone *else* do the cooking is real.

I hear Pierre's collar jingling, which means he and Dad make it back from their walk just fine. I can breathe. There is no ambulance idling outside, its red light spinning out woe – this time.

“I'm back!” he calls, a song in his voice from the fresh-air sojourn. And then, all too soon: a crash. A ceramic garden planter is smashed in what sounds like Dad's cartwheel into what, the ivy? I race outside to see and yes, there he is. Unhurt. Unfazed.

Pierre, who loves this game, licks his face. Posed at an unnatural angle Dad is sprawled in the ivy. He looks up and tries to laugh.

“It’s really the shits, isn’t it?” he says.

It really is.

No. 9, rue de la Tour, Paris

At their apartment in Paris, Dad is up with the street sweepers – dressed. Crisp pink button-down shirt, natty tweed sport coat and, on occasion when the weather is cold, a cravat like French men affect. He’s out the door in the dark to toddle down to the corner patisserie. There, he will choose a still-warm baguette, croissants and, if he wants to be naughty, a *pain au chocolat* – his cholesterol be damned. The uniformed sweepers wield green plastic brooms, and, if they had them, would tip their hats when Dad passes; instead they sing their greeting, *Bonjour, Monsieur*, in that lilting, cheery French tone used by those Parisians who think Dad’s a kick. His stiff but speedy shuffle along the rue de la Tour has none of the stall of his East Bay gait. Instead, as the street sweepers note, it is brisk, even bold.

“*Belle journée, mon homme*,” the short one says. Dad steps surely by the broom and says in his version of fluent French, which is English spoken louder than usual, “A wonderful day to you, too, my friend.”

Back in the apartment, Mom in her bathrobe answers the phone, “Hello-o?” In her voice is a swell, a song, a rise in octave that is nothing like her East Bay tone. This happy hello is music to me when I call; it is Mom’s “Paris voice.”

Here comes Dad, baguette, croissants and, yes, *pain au chocolat* in hand. He returns to the apartment via the spiral stairs, and lets the elevator sit idle. Between the hundreds of steps my parents must climb when traveling by Métro, and the block upon block they must walk in their explorations of the city, Mom and Dad at their apartment in Paris are ever on the move.

“Tom?” Mom calls from the kitchen when she hears the heavy, old door thud shut. And louder: “TOM? HURRY UP. YOUR TEA IS HOT.” Dad wends his way to the breakfast table and does not get caught on the tiny, antique chair in the foyer. He neither bumps the oddly placed dining table nor trips over the sisal rug with its edges sticking up.

“Here I come! I brought you a nice croissant,” he says and fails to flip over the footstool directly in his path. He makes his way from door to table with no incident at all.

“Thank you, Darling,” says Mom. She uses her Paris voice.

* * *

When in 1513 conquistador Ponce de León set sail from Spain in search of the mythical Fountain of Youth, he thought maybe, *Florida*. There, he hoped, he would discover the land the Caribbean islanders called Bimini and drink of the river, brook, lagoon or pool whose magical waters would grant him enduring youth. Really, he should have thought, *Paris*. The conquistador never did find the fountain of restorative waters, as lovely as Florida was, but my parents have. Set them down in the City of Light, and that which is slow speeds up, that which is stiff relaxes, that which is crabby happies.

“What do you think it is?” I ask Dad one day. We walk along – no, we *promenade*, as the French do – in the Luxembourg Gardens after a lazy lunch at Café de Flore in Saint Germain, one of his favorite Sunday forays.

“What do you mean? Your mother and I are no different here than we are anywhere.” He throws his shoulders back to attempt his military bearing of 60 years ago and steps effectively wobble-free past the old-fashioned music stand where in summer bands play the oompah marches he loves. The Luxembourg Gardens’ terraced woods and walks, fountains and pools offer obstacles to taunt his balance – a stair that abruptly appears, a path of gravel that shifts, a jogging mom with her child in a rolling *poussette* that whizzes by, too close.

“I mean, you are not falling over. And,” I add because it is true, “you hear better.”

“My French isn’t bad either.” He laughs.

In view of the flower-frilled former palace of Henry IV’s widowed queen, Marie de Médicis, Dad and I promenade. We pass children who use long, thin sticks to poke at toy sailboats they float in the shallow fountain. Lovers who lounge in the gardens’ green iron chairs converse and kiss. There are picnickers, chess-players and old ladies lazing on benches who roll down their stockings to take the sun. Our walk, indeed, has lots of what Paris is all about: great people-watching. Dad is dapper in his dressed-for-Paris coat and cravat, and the ladies, I notice, notice him. Every now and then he offers a nod and *Hello, Madame*, and once, a coquette in her 90s wearing scandal-ripe lipstick of

vavavoom-red, replied by bursting into a smile so dazzling I was sure she meant to bewitch him.

“Do you know who that is?” Dad points not to a madame but to a white marble statue. It’s a goddess, at first glance, on a pedestal.

“No, who?”

This is one of his preferred Paris pastimes, quizzing me on the French history I know nothing about when compared with his vast learning and ceaseless reading on the topic. “Yes, you do. That’s Anne of France. She made the treaty ending the Hundred Years War.” Anne stands stoic and silent among 19 other former French queens and female saints – all with hot bodies and faces carved by obvious admirers of feminine beauty. Whether it’s Saint Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris, or Louise of Savoy, who died from a chill she caught while watching a comet, Dad knows the details of their lives – gruesome to titillating – and relishes the telling.

“You know her,” he says before the statue of a comely Jeanne III of Navarre. “Rumor had it she was sent perfumed gloves by Catherine de Médici that poisoned her to death.”

I note Jeanne’s pallor and imagine it – the sniff, the swoon, the death throes on the floor of, what, her boudoir? In the palace? In every twist and turn of the garden lies a noteworthy artwork or view – the sun-spangled *allées* of horse-chestnut trees, perhaps, or the figure of painter Delacroix. Inspired, Dad launches a lesson from each that makes him seem less history professor than little kid jazzed by all the cool things there are in Paris to see.

Thus we promenade, Dad and I, and I consider that, at their home in the Bay Area, my parents walk the dog around the block – sometimes twice – and afterwards are not so brimming with stories they are eager to share. The neighbor’s new remodel does not have the same enthrall as a queen dispatched by poison. So bed by ten must seem to them sweet relief from stark, raving, as French say, *ennui*.

“Paris is great, isn’t it? Dad trips a little when he maneuvers into his seat of the gingerbread café where we, al fresco, celebrate the day with a *citron pressé*. But he does not topple. Post-promenade his complexion is rosy, his voice robust.

It really is.

* * *

“What would you think of the puréed cauliflower?” At their apartment in Paris, Mom again is on the topic of dinner. She is an eager, if self-critical cook, so a high point in any day is her trip to market. Paris’s legendary outdoor *marchés* are stall upon stall of fruit sellers, fishmongers, produce pushers, cheese purveyors and providers of what to Mom is utter joy: the ingredients with which she can concoct dishes that are never up to her own standards, but which, because they are French-inspired and big on butter, keep her trying, ever trying, to reach her elusive personal best as a family chef driven by perfection.

“Butter makes it all taste better,” she has suggested more than once when Dad, equally finicky, has panned one of her culinary experiments. “Julia Child was right.” Mom is given permission in France to shop with abandon not just for butter, for also for other no-no’s health- and waist-conscious Americans like my parents try to limit –

cheese, say, or pastries. Add the wonderful fact the French are batty for puréed everything, especially when blended with the rich crème fraîche that makes a good-for-you vegetable go straight to the hips – broccoli, carrots, artichokes, squash. And at their apartment in Paris, Mom has all she needs to make the market a destination she cannot wait to visit.

“We could have the puréed cauliflower with those wonderful little salmon filets,” she says to Dad, who nods off in the *salon* under a book. Beside him is a cup of hot tea she warns him to *not*, please dear God, knock over onto the sisal carpet impossible to clean. “TOM? SALMON? FOR DINNER?” He says great, and Mom consults the hall closet to haul out the hand-held sack-on-wheels Parisian shoppers use to trek home their market plunder. Off she rolls. Outside the apartment door are steep, spiral stairs down which Mom bumps the cart with sighs of struggle. But once across the building courtyard and out onto the streets of Paris, she picks-up the pace of a woman on a mission.

They are everywhere: Parisian *mesdames* of a certain age who have spent their lives speeding along sidewalks and up-and-down Métro steps and thus do not show their aches, if any, or slow for pain, if it’s there. These demons born of a Paris lifestyle focused on walking – a lot – maneuver their rolling shopping sacks among packs of pedestrians with the agility of an especially fierce Formula One driver. If hell hath no fury like a madame headed to market who stalls out due to an unwanted distraction – a wallet left at home, perhaps, or a husband’s list of special requests forgotten – then *out of the way* is the best place to be. Mom is not quite as purposeful as a true Parisian, but still:

she steps and rolls determined to meet her thrill. For a thrill it is, indeed, to arrive at the neighborhood farmers' market and its open-air splendor of blood oranges arranged in pyramids as artful as I.M. Pei's at the Louvre, and lettuces still dewy from a French country field.

“*Bonjour, Madame.*”

“*Bonjour, Madame.*”

“*Bonjour, Madame.*”

Mom browses the bounty of pears worthy of a still life and eggplants this side of heaven in freshness, and the market barkers flatter and flirt with her.

“A beautiful *choux* for a beautiful woman,” one says, and with tenderness hands over his pride of a fat white cauliflower.

“*Eh bien*, such a lovely smile on this lovely day.” The next selects his very best stalks of asparagus to present with a courtly bow.

Being flattered and flirted with makes Mom girlish. “*Merçi, Monsieur,*” she says, again and again – in her Paris voice. And I notice the stiff hip she complained of earlier in the day has disappeared. Her shopping sack is nearly stuffed by the time she leaves behind this date with her produce-purveying admirers and, advancing in her errand, descends the escalator down into Inno. Inno is the supermarket of the *quartier*; it's a grotto of groceries predominantly French and thus to Mom enthralling. With a full-service patisserie in front, a chipped-ice fish display in back and aisle after aisle of treats and treasures Parisians make into meals, Inno serves as Oz for Mom's cooking passions. The moment she enters, Inno swallows her up. Look for the cookie display and there she

will be – standing before it for days, it would seem, as if in a dazzled trance. Find the cheese nook, the sauce shelf, the mustard jars: there she will gaze – let’s say for weeks – as if hypnotized. In the wine arena the French *Muscadet*, at only four euros per bottle, works like voodoo to seduce her. And then there is the lure of salmon steaks miraculously – fantastically – bone-free. It is while grocery shopping that Mom forgets herself, her worries, her woes, and enters the exciting land of her culinary imagination. Here, it is entirely forgotten, the fatigue that afflicted her a mere week earlier at her home in the East Bay.

“I could live right here,” she’ll say, statute-still and staring at shelves in the dairy aisle. Today, she is reluctant to budge from the refrigerated case of yogurts, mousses, flans and *Ile Flôttante*, the dessert to which we both are addicted. But Dad and dinner await. The *caisse* rings her up and she drags the leaden and overstuffed rolling sack up the Inno escalator and out onto rue de Passy. There, as she wends her way along a tiny sidewalk teeming with Parisians, the Formula One *mesdames* do battle to pass her on a curve. She doesn’t let them.

“Tom?” she says after the heavy, old apartment door thuds shut. “TOM? DID THE TEA TURN OVER?” Dad snuffles quiet snores in the salon’s reading chair, the completed crossword in his lap and the full cup of tea beside him – cold. Satisfied the sisal rug is safe yet another day – *so far* – Mom with a quick light step dances the shopping sack in to the kitchen. Together, she and her trove of treasures will indulge in some creative culinary escapade that means snuggly in bed by seven simply won’t

happen. Instead, the evening, full and rich with simple enjoyment, will stretch to after eleven.

* * *

Laduree Tea Room, Place de la Madeleine

Here I am with Mom and Dad. They are at it. “Tom,” Mom says to Dad in *that tone* across the teeny table. Dad ignores her and looks around the dining room, where walls are gilded with golden frou-frou and chic, cashmere-clad Parisians eat and chat. He acts like he has no idea she is addressing him, which he likely doesn’t, due to his nearly complete hearing loss.

“TOM?” she says, now louder. “THE SHRIMP SALAD?” The waiter in white apron and bow tie waits politely, pencil poised. Dad steadily studies something in the far corner – another diner, perhaps, some frou-frou. “THE SHRIMP. DO YOU WANT THE SHRIMP SALAD?” Mom’s rising irritation raises a rumble of foreboding in me. I feel four, not fifty. *Please don’t fight*, my body protests while my mind, more grown-up, reasons like a sensible adult: *A public scene in Paris? I’ll die.*

“Goddamnit,” Dad replies at last. “I *said* I’ll have the cheese omelet.” The waiter whisks himself off as my parents swap well-practiced looks of exasperation. They have been married for either eight or 58 years, depending on whether you count the dozen years of divorce in which they dallied before eloping to Lake Tahoe to remarry. They have settled into *their thing*. It’s a relationship of such intense familiarity that Mom should have known the cheese omelet would eclipse the shrimp salad. Still, Dad often finds it fun to get a rise out of her. It’s his devilish little pleasure to make Mom mad by,

for instance, letting her think he wants the shrimp even though it makes him sick and then checking out to study frou-frou.

At their home in the Bay Area, these tiffs aren't *that* fun. Mostly because there aren't lots of innocent onlookers like there are in, say, Laduree. Here, the cashmere-clad chit-chatters lend my parents' thing the thrill of an audience eager to drop their conversations and pause mid-chew to get very still and/or gawk at what promises to be wonderful luncheon amusement.

"Why didn't you say the cheese omelet *up front*," Mom says. Her voice is a hiss as low as she can get it while still allowing Dad to hear. This hiss causes the couple just to our left to exchange a look and stare at Mom in a way that makes it plain they are trying not to. Dad turns to me.

"Didn't I say, right when we sat down, that I felt like a nice omelet? The problem with your mother..." He zings me a wink that she can't see. "The problem with your mother is that she never listens to me."

"That is not true!" Mom is not using her Paris voice. The diners two, even three tables over stop cutting into their quiche Lorraine, they cease spooning-up their *soupe à l'oignon* to better eavesdrop. "You don't *want* to just say what you want." Before things can escalate, the waiter whisks himself back to our table and, with much clattering of dishware to manage the miniscule space, plops before Dad his omelet – sans any evidence of cheese. Mom's shrimp salad also displeases her. The shrimp appear not in the best of health and the lettuce is listless.

They both frown.

“I told you, you should have had the chicken sandwich,” Mom says.

“Oh, horseshit!” Dad says.

A foursome of lunching ladies across the room turns, for *horseshit* is an especially noteworthy word to use in a restaurant where everyone except us is speaking French. It’s exotic, uncommon, and very, very American. We are the floorshow now.

“Your father just wants to be difficult,” Mom says. In her eyes is a surreptitious twinkle of playfulness that bypasses Dad, who, meanwhile, tries to catch the waiter’s eye to tell him, *what the hell?* I offer to trade my *sandwich fromage*, which looks delicious, if either of my parents would rather have that, or explain to the waiter that they both made a mistake. But no: Mom will suffer through the shrimp salad and Dad the disappointing omelet for the sake of their thing, which is getting great play here at Laduree. Clearly, Mom and Dad enjoy these games. A snippy word here, a snarky tone there, and my parents get to bleed-out built-up whatever it is they harbor. A lousy meal is excellent. They can pretend to blame one another for the bad menu choice and bond in their common joy of a verbal joust that leaves me jittery with the childish wish my parents were perfect and everything, all the time, happy. At the moment Mom looks flushed and freshened by a sense of fun. Dad, too, seems reconnected to the bad-boy naughtiness that has made their relationship, according to Mom, “never dull.” The adult me recognizes this, not as a consolation prize for imperfect parents, but rather as a reward: my parents, enlivened, are revived by whatever it is in Paris that kicks them out of their East Bay blahs. Here, as the tea room entertainment, they are reacquainted with the youthful fun – *fun?* – they have with one another.

“I want to be difficult? The hell I do!” Dad gives up on ever beckoning the waiter, now gone missing in some unseen section of the restaurant. “You know I don’t hear well. Maybe the next time you want to tell me what to order you should write it down. Here.” He with faux fury slides a small napkin across the table. Mom, with fake pique snaps it up.

“That’s a great idea,” she says. “Maybe from now on, if I have *anything* to say, I should write it down.”

She pulls from her purse a petite pink pen and writes. She regards her handiwork a moment and slides the napkin back to Dad. He flips it up. He is careful to disguise his reaction. He reaches for his pen, and soon sends the napkin sliding back. When she finishes reading and the long-gone waiter reappears to remove the ailing shrimp and inedible omelet, and the lunching ladies remember their quiche – show over – I intercept the napkin.

“I love you,” it says.

“Me, too,” it says.

* * *

Ponce de Leon missed it by the entire Atlantic Ocean he need not have bothered to sail across. The magical waters of youth were there all along, right on his own continent. *Paris*, he could have thought. My parents did and it has made all the difference.

THE MIRACLE OF PIERRE

The mystery of kismet. The magic of fate. Or, if you like, call it the hand of the Divine. When an unwanted puppy marooned for months in a gritty Paris pet shop finds home with a grieving man living a world away, and that man's heart is healed in the homecoming, it's a love affair of proof that some things – good things, true things – are meant to be. And miracles, however small, can happen in ways both mysterious and strange.

I had been living in the City of Light several months when my brother called. George was a retailer hard at work back home in San Francisco.

“I had to put Terrence down,” he said. I heard pain in his voice, and disbelief. “Just this morning.” Terrence was a 14-year-old Wire Fox Terrier and, for every one of those 14 years, George's deeply treasured friend.

I was so sorry.

“Come to Paris,” I said. “There is nothing like Paris to mend a broken heart.” Certainly I had spent plenty of time wandering the *rues* and lazing in cafés to know how any distressed mood can be soothed by a brisk walk through the Tuileries in bloom, or a meal made entirely of perfect *pommes frites*. So I was happy when two weeks later George arrived, hollow-eyed and pale: he was sad to his soul and insisted he would be for eons.

“You know what people are saying?” He was incredulous. “They're telling me to get another dog right away. To help me get over it.” He didn't fight his tears: “There

is no way!” George wasn’t ready and, given the wretched look of his thinner-than-usual self, it wouldn’t be time for a while.

And yet, there we were, just for fun, touring Paris’s pet shops; these are the *animaleries* squeezed side-by-side line the *quai* that borders the Seine. These shops look out on the imposing grandeur of Nôtre Dame, the beauty of Sainte Chappelle, but inside each is a mad menagerie of purebred kittens, squawking macaws and rare, exotic chickens. The shops are often crowded, and in summer, stuffy and hot. When it comes to the cages of glass that contain a wiggling, yipping pack of adoptable puppies, it is bittersweet indeed. For however joyful they are, these baby Beagles and wee Pekingese, pet shop policy typically forbids they leave their cage until the day they are adopted. Rarely does pet shop staff take them out to play, never are they walked outdoors, seldom are they held. Day after day in small, glass cages, the puppies simply wait.

It was a stunning September afternoon when George and I strolled into one such shop near Pont Neuf, Paris’s oldest bridge. We had just savored some amazing Berthillon pear sorbet on the Ile Saint-Louis and were in high spirits, despite the sadness just below my brother’s surface.

“Let’s look. Just to look,” I said. George was game.

We entered Le Merle Blanc (“the white blackbird”) and there they were: all the puppies needing homes, each heartbreakingly irresistible. Weeks-old West Highland Terriers, fluffballs of Bichon Frises, Maltese so petite they fit in a purse. As we walked past the bulldogs that barked themselves silly, and the Papillons that romped with their littermates, neither Chihuahua nor Chow Chow moved George to murmur more than the

occasional *hi there*, or allow himself a quiet, *you're so cute!* Then we strolled past a cage that, unlike the others, held a single dog. It was a Wire Fox Terrier, like Terrence.

“Oh, no!” George yelped. The fuzzy puppy with the inquisitive face looked at us expectantly, as if begging to be held. My brother and I both melted, and we named him then and there: Pierre.

“Absolutely not,” George said before I could suggest it. “No way can I take him home. It’s too soon, I’m not ready. Forget it!” Without another look we escaped Le Merle Blanc and got on with our day at the Musée d’Orsay.

Eight days later George flew home to San Francisco and nothing more was said of the puppy Pierre. Yet, I could not help myself. Once a week I dropped into the shop to check on the dog’s adoption. As time passed, it seemed many, if not most of the caged Pomeranians, Pointers and Pugs found homes. But week after week I was distressed to see Pierre. Still there. He was getting bigger, growing older, and soon would lose his tiny new-puppy appeal. The week his price was marked down and Pierre went on sale, I worried.

“What happens to the puppies no one ever adopts?” I asked the pet shop’s *patron*. “That is my concern, Madame,” he said, “not yours.” But I *was* concerned. It was time to email George. “Pierre is still not adopted!” Though I wrote in something of a desperate whine, I received only a brief reply. “Oh, how sad!” my brother wrote. “What can we do?”

I could tell he was troubled, but not enough to consent to another dog. Not even for Christmas, which fast approached. On Thanksgiving Day, Pierre was still there; again

his price was marked down. He became a puppy “bargain.” Come Christmas Eve, no Parisian *papa* or *maman* chose him to be Santa’s wonderful surprise for their overjoyed child. Christmas Day found Pierre where no dog ever should be during the season of sharing and joy: in his small cage, in the small shop, alone.

“How merry a Christmas is this?” I telephoned my brother. It had been weeks and weeks – months – that I had checked on Pierre, so now I was wracked with worry. What would happen if he went unwanted for even longer? What *was* the pet shop’s deadline for adoptables, and what would happen to Pierre if he never found a home, ever? My voice did not disguise my upset. “Pierre is still there!” Over the line I heard only George’s silence.

New Year’s Day came, and New Year’s Day went. Pierre remained in his cage. By now Le Merle Blanc had discounted his once-high purebred’s price so severely that the shop was almost giving him away – still to no takers. The Welsh Springer spaniel, the Standard Schnauser, even the rare and pretty Puli – all found homes. But Pierre stayed put. His wiry white coat was slowly matting; he was growing almost too big for his cage. It wasn’t until mid-January that I was surprised by a newsy email.

“I’m on my way,” George wrote. My heart leapt. *He’s coming to get Pierre!* But before I could finish the thrilling thought that my brother had rerouted his business trip to New York via Paris solely to adopt the so-far unwanted dog, I was proved wrong. “If that puppy is still in the shop these five months later, my trip will be ruined,” he said. “But no way. There is still no way I can take him. It’s too soon. I’m not ready. Okay?”

Okay.

George arrived in Paris without the least desire to rest after his exhausting overnight flight. He dropped his bags at my place, stood in the foyer looking exactly as wretched as he had after Terrence's death months earlier, and announced: "Let's go see Pierre."

There is no way? Are you sure?

We hopped the Métro to rue de Rivoli and on the ride George was somber. When again we were above ground, big, sloppy drops of rain soaked us as we raced to Le Merle Blanc. We entered the shop and it was just as we feared. Pierre was still there. His right paw now had a sore; he suffered from kennel cough.

"Why is this wirehaired terrier not wanted?" George said to the *patron*. His name, we learned later, was Pierre. *What were the odds?* "Je ne sais pas." He shrugged. "Perhaps the terrier is not so much in fashion these days, you know?"

Not in fashion?

Pierre not chic! We'd be shocked at such shallowness if, during George's visit, we hadn't lunched in a sidewalk café next to an arty, black-clad couple who passed back and forth between laps a jumpy puppy currently all the rage: a Jack Russell Terrier. "Ah, non," sighed Monsieur when we asked if wirehaired terriers currently were in style. "In Paris," he said, "it is bad form to own a breed not *branché* – trendy – you see?" And Pierre? It seemed he, stylishly speaking, belonged in the past with Asta, the movie star dog of the '30s.

Outside Pierre's cage we gazed through the glass and felt both helpless and sad. The not-wanted dog looked so lonely, and his future seemed bleak indeed. We left Le

Merle Blanc and, as my brother promised, his trip was ruined. Our visit to the Louvre, our picnic lunch in the Luxembourg Gardens, our hike to the top of the Arc de Triomphe – even our window shopping along rue Faubourg St. Honoré – not one of Paris’s sights, none of its delights could shake George from his funk.

“We’ve got to do something,” he at last announced over the frothy hot chocolate we were not enjoying at Angelina’s tea salon.

“Like what?” I secretly hoped, as always, that George would dare to consider Pierre. I wished he would risk it, loving again as he had loved his cherished Terrence. But he was insistent. “I can’t have another dog yet. I’m so sorry, I just can’t.” Still, he added, “something. We have to do *something*.”

Later that night, George moped about, preoccupied. Depressed through dinner, silent during dessert, it wasn’t until hours later that there was a glimmer of something in him. I think it was an idea.

“What if I...,” he began after donning pajamas for bed.

“What?” *Please dear God, let him adopt this dog!*

Suddenly, as if a fire was lit beneath him, my brother leapt to the phone and dialed his office (one minute to closing). It “just happened” that there, on his desk, was the number of the Northern California Fox Terrier Rescue League; his assistant (with one foot out the door) read it off. Convinced it was a hopeless longshot (the puppy was halfway around the world, after all), George dialed the League. The woman who answered (and said she normally never picked-up the phone after-hours) listened to George’s story and...yes. If he could get Pierre out of Paris, they would work to find him

a home. But no promises! More calls followed. Yes, the airline would allow the dog aboard George's return flight; it "just happened" that, thanks to a last-minute canine cancellation, there was one animal allowance left. Yes, yes, yes. With each call and each go-ahead in arrangements, it felt as if a flow had begun. Doors were opening, a way being made.

We had our plan. We would buy Pierre and send him to America. We hoped desperately he would go to a loving home and family, but George was filled with trepidation. *What if they can't place him?* The puppy's oddly-flopping ears, skimpy-haired legs and European puppy-mill provenance made him far from the purebred ideal so desired by Wire Fox Terrier aficionados. Pierre was a markdown in every way, and we fretted over his fate.

* * *

The Paris day was brilliant and glittering after the rain. Again, George and I hopped the Métro and raced to rescue Pierre. At Le Merle Blanc the *patron*, Pierre, was only too glad to release the terrier after his seven long months of confinement. For so many formative weeks Pierre had been completely denied all the rights – and rites – of young puppyhood. He knew nothing of a walk outdoors, a sniff of fresh grass, or a romp with other puppies in the park. Pierre's weepy eyes and overlong nails testified to his lack of love, and, when George reached in the cage to take him from his bed of dry straw, his wild, terrified wiggles told us that seven months without love was a very, very long time.

George held the trembling terrier and we began the purchase transaction. It was a complicated thing involving euros, the purebred puppy's papers, French-U.S. requirements for a dog's international travel. Just then: the mystery of kismet. The magic of fate. Everything seemed to go wrong. And right. The shop's credit card machine jammed. "*Zut alors,*" said the *patron*, "not again." My brother and I exchanged looks of alarm. *Don't let there be a problem now!* Panic rising, we realized we did not have Pierre's price in cash. Time stopped while we waited – and waited – for Pierre-the-*patron* to troubleshoot his machine. But with the delay, and in our fear that some small snafu would make it impossible to adopt the dog, we did not hear the bells that announced the pet shop door had opened. We did, however, hear *her*.

"Oh, a fox terrier! I absolutely love fox terriers!" A fake-fur-clad blonde suddenly appeared at George's side.

Fate came dressed in fur?

"Do you want him?" George blurted as I stood silent in amazement. This fox terrier lover was speaking, of all things, English. "We want to find him a home."

When destiny delivers, all feels surreal. The blonde, named Brinn, was American. This struck me as a marvel. For the entire five months I had dropped into the pet shop, I had not encountered one. What's more, out of all possible hometowns in the vast United States, Brinn lived in ours. It was our own cousin, Jim, who introduced her to her husband – the husband whose okay she needed, she said, to take Pierre home as an exciting surprise for their three children.

George and I were stunned. What were the chances that at the precise moment – out of months and months of moments – my brother committed to plucking Pierre from an uncertain future, his happy home would appear – *proof!* – just like that? Visiting Paris with girlfriends, Brinn certainly had no intention of adopting a dog. But when she walked by the pet shop on her way to Notre Dame, she “got the strangest sensation,” she said, she should enter. One look at Pierre in George’s arms turned her strange sensation into an instant decision. “I wanted him for the kids,” she said. “No question.” Brinn could not take the terrier home with her then – her flight the next day had no canine allowance and Pierre did not have his vet-issued traveling papers. But she was so confident of her husband’s approval that she insisted on paying for Pierre right there – in cash. It still was up to George to get the puppy to San Francisco; it was a favor he was overjoyed to perform. After all, his flight didn’t leave for another 10 days. Ten entire days to play with Pierre in Paris!

Play they did. And work. George’s vacation plans were revamped on the spot. A trip to fabulous Versailles, a viewing of the paintings of Monet at the Musée Marmatton, and lingering brasserie meals in romantic St. Germain were replaced by forays to a popular dog field in the Bois de Boulogne. George’s daily morning run around the Eiffel Tower was transformed into lessons in leash skills. Housebreaking was such an arduous adventure that both fell exhausted into bed each evening early – George feeling accomplished and Pierre all wags. One such evening, the phone buzzed. It was Brinn. “My husband is all for it!” She had Pierre’s new home ready, she said, complete with a monogrammed doggy bed, and a dinner bowl with “Pierre” scripted in gold. Waiting for

him was a handsome designer collar, a stylish matching leash, and even a personal trainer at an exclusive obedience school. It was going to be a very good home. “Hurry back!” Brinn said. “The kids can’t wait to meet Pierre.”

The next day the terrier passed the veterinary exam that pronounced him fit to fly, and when the big day arrived he was ready. Housebroken, leash-trained, and fluffy as only a fresh, clean puppy can be after a bath at Chez Louis, Pierre and George flew from Paris, together. George, for one, was excited about the future.

Brinn and her family were eager for their arrival, and a rendezvous at her home had been arranged for the next day. George and Pierre landed in San Francisco and, happily for George, had time for one more session of play. They raced straightaway to the park. Jet lag was no problem for the Parisian puppy; he instantly adapted his frisky French self to the grassy, California field full of sun. They ran; they romped; George threw – and Pierre caught – the ball, the Frisbee, the Kong. Jet lag was no issue for George as well. He forgot himself in the joy of Pierre having fun.

Rendezvous time came...and went. Twice.

Three days later, Brinn called. “Well?” She already knew the truth, but amazingly, graciously, was prepared for it.

“Well, I...uh,” George began. He was unable to say what his heart had known from that first day months ago at the pet shop in Paris. It was love. At first sight? Oh, yes.

“I had a feeling this would happen.” Brinn’s voice was soft not from disappointment but understanding. “Pierre is yours. He always was.”

It was true. George and Pierre brought together by a flow of events unforeseen was a match made in...well, Paris. Pierre found a loving home, George the ideal companion, and each healed the other's heart of unhappiness.

Had Brinn not appeared the charmed moment she did, the matchmaking of man and best friend might never have happened. Today George likes to think Pierre went unadopted so long because he was waiting, all along, for him. Brinn imagines she was at the right place at the right time to help George overcome his fear of commitment. And Pierre, well, he would rather romp on the lawn with a toy than ponder why life is now so happy. But, if not for the mystery of synchronicity, his story – and George's – would have ended back at Le Merle Blanc with a broken machine and the uncertain fate of a marked-down, not-chic, unwanted French fox terrier.

Five days after Brinn learned her family would not adopt Pierre after all, she was surprised by her husband's gift of Logan, a Wire Fox Terrier rescue. Lovable Logan was a puppy destined for her home alone, she said, for his temperament was ideal for her rambunctious family.

And in a canine twist on the classic love affair set in Paris, George and Pierre, I am pleased to report, are now living – how else? – happily ever after.

MASTERING THE ART OF LIKING FRENCH COOKING

“It’s the big gray bird, Madame.” The waiter flaps his elbows a little to describe the word on the menu I have never before seen in my life. “On the farm.”

On the farm? Is it turkey? No. An especially large chicken? No. It’s not duck, goose, quail, squab, rooster or hen of any size. I give my mother the *now-what?* look. She has graciously declined the waiter’s offer of “the fish that flies” and we are likely left with yet another embarrassing moment where we are forced to order four desserts for dinner, to share, with extra baguettes and don’t skimp on the butter. Or wine.

Ostrich?

Yes.

We are dining – as opposed to eating, which is much less elegant – at a French country villa just outside Paris. To call the restaurant lovely would not do justice to the ostrich and other exotics featured on the menu. As a true *tempête* roars outside, with lashing rain and ferocious winds that blew us in seeking solace, the dining room is golden, gilded, gorgeous in candlelight, with a warming fire, sparkling crystal, glinting silver and equally sparkly diners dressed to show classic French respect to the winged fish.

Skate?

Yes.

We beg your pardon, we are so sorry, we’re so embarrassed to say, “I’ll have the Tarte Tartin and the cake with *cerises*, please. And Madame,” I gesture to my mother,

who looks profoundly pained that, once again, she'll be going to bed on a big sugar high that disrupts her sleep with nightmares, "Madame will have the *gateaux á l'orange* and the apricot tart – with ice cream. *Merci.*"

Americans. The waiter is too trained in proper *politesse* to huff off, but my mom and I? We are well warmed up now, with shame. After all, this is France. France! Land of legendary cuisine known the world over for its incomparable, well, awesomeness. Impeccably prepared and exquisitely presented, French cooking from probably cave-days has been exalted as a great art mastered only by those for whom food is the *crème de la crème* of life essentials. Travel to France and you'll eat very, very well, goes the lore. Five-star cheeses, phenomenal wines, and recipes fussed over by generations of chefs and home cooks alike, those obsessed by that which must be perfection: French food is *the* cuisine to set you swooning, *I have never, EVER tasted anything so delicious.* Now that we're here? Too bad there's nothing to eat.

"Oh, it's all right." Mom butters the first bite of the baguette or two that will serve as tonight's first four courses before our meal of desserts. "You know how it is in France. You get what you get, and you're grateful."

I know.

When in 1948 Julia Child landed in France with her husband, Paul, and the whale of a sky-blue Buick they christened "The Blue Flash," it wasn't long before the culinary legend was *seriously* over the moon for the food.

"*Portugaises* (oysters), *sole meunière*, *salade verte*, *fromage blanc*, *café filtre.* Ah me!" Julia relives her first lunch at a restaurant in Rouen in *My Life in France*, her

memoir of the years 1948 to 1954 when she lived in Paris and Marseille and celebrated “the things I have loved most in life: my husband Paul Child; la belle France; and the many pleasures of cooking and eating.” She writes: “Paul and I floated out the door into the brilliant sunshine and cool air. Our first lunch together in France had been absolute perfection. It was the most exciting meal of my life.”

A generation earlier, another famous *gourmande*, M.F.K. Fisher, sailed to France and she, too, was overcome by the food. “Paris was everything that I had dreamed,” she remembers in *The Art of Eating*, her 744-page homage to the joys of cuisine, a celebration of a book “about eating and about what to eat and about people who eat.” She writes: “The hot chocolate and rich croissants were the most delicious things, there in bed with the Seine flowing past me and pigeons wheeling around the gray Palace mansards, that I had ever eaten.” Only in France are the living things sacrificed on the altar of taste *honored*, claims M.F.K., to find themselves French. “Oh, the trout!” she writes of how a brasserie waitress once made an entrée suggestion: “Any trout is glad, truly glad, to be prepared by Monsieur Paul.”

Julia Child and Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher had no fear of fish that fly, gave no pause at ostrich. They ate it all. There is Julia’s cherished *Cervelles au Beurre Noir* (lamb’s brains in brown butter sauce), a recipe featured in her *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. And there is M.F.K.’s prize *Calf’s Head à la Tortue*, a recipe whose instructions begin, “Bone blanch and trim a calf’s head, cut it up into large scallops, keep the ears whole...” And there is *moi*, a lifelong vegetarian for whom calf’s brains and lamb’s head – or whatever – best not be served for dinner here in France or anywhere.

Mom, too, is possessed of a palate that's happiest when treated to lots of fresh veggies and pasta.

But here we are on the rue de Rivoli, squeezed together behind a tiny café table and perusing the luncheon menu. It's an early trip, one of my first to France, and my French is not yet seasoned. Which means the menu holds mysteries. We are absolutely famished, we are *fainting* from starvation, for it has been a good two hours since our last meal, and the Louvre, from where we've just come, has yet to install the cafés, buffets and Starbucks that will, one day, make starvation like ours obsolete. The teeny table to our left is plied with plates of temptations I'm dying to devour *right now*: a heap of brilliantly green julienned green beans; a fragrant pile of golden French fries. The teeny table to our right is edge-to-edge awash with thrills I don't see on the menu: creamy, steamy, broiled potatoes *dauphinoise*; small *petit pois* as perfect as pearls, each glistening after its bath in butter; baby salad greens so fresh and perky they look to have been kissed – passionately – by an especially sassy vinaigrette.

“Madame?” The waiter stands above me, pencil poised. On my illustrated *carte* I see no potatoes, no peas, no greens. “*S'il vous plait.*”

Impatient, the waiter wants me on it. But there is nothing on the menu I recognize. In my panic to perform, its French words gyrate before my eyes like a kaleidoscope of nonsense. *Omelet!* Thank God, a word I understand stops jiggling.

“*L'omelette, s'il vous plait. Merci, Monsieur.*” Besides famished Mom, too, is flummoxed. “What is there for lunch?” She mouths rather than says this, so as not to offend the waiting waiter. The French onion soup she has traveled all the way to Paris

for is not offered, and none of the entrée options – blood sausage anyone? – tempt her like those piled-up potatoes *dauphinoise* might, if only she could find them.

“*Oui? Madame?*” The waiter wants not to wait a second longer. Hurried, Mom says something. Anything. “*L’omelette, s’il vous plait.*” She smiles politely. “*Merci, Monsieur.*” I know the last thing she wants are eggs for lunch, since it was eggs for breakfast and, in lieu of the monkfish she ordered by mistake, which arrived at the table complete with head and an upside eye that looked at her beseechingly, *please don’t eat me*, eggs for dinner last night. But she’s holding out. There’s got to be French onion soup *somewhere* in Paris, but where?

Well, at least this café’s luncheon special of the day, the omelet, will come with a mountain of fries and a side of some of that frisky-looking lettuce, yes?

No.

The waiter eventually deposits our plates with a clattery racket and I am too shocked even to scream. Our omelets, made from eggs and a handful of fat, black, glistening, slippery-looking blobs I learn are mussels – mussels! – lie bare-naked on the plate with not so much as a sprig of parsley. What of the julienned green beans? What of the pearls of buttery peas? I make a *bleh* face at Mom. The diners to our left, to our right – Parisians now languid with satisfaction after their meal of marvels somehow lost to us, we menu-challenged Americans, see my pantomime and raise eyebrows in astonishment. Surely I would be head over heels for the decadent specialty that is a mussel omelette! The monsieur who dined on a composé of crudities that could make me cry with their beauty – such colorful sweet carrots! – smiles in understanding and pity. Madame who

feasted on a lentil terrine too delicious-looking to describe is so sorry she offers the remains of her plate – a few cold, broken fries – and says she hopes that, in time, we will come to find the food of France to our liking.

Oh, but we will! Some food. Mom and I most certainly enjoy the eight little pastries we eventually share to stave off our Louvre-induced faint. Our picnic on a bench by the Seine of madeleines and éclairs and chocolate-topped meringues is the first of many successful lunches we will, in future days, have catered exclusively by a patisserie.

How Julia and M.F.K. would scoff at our cluelessness. Why, Julia *loved* mussels, also known as “the poor man’s oyster.” She loved them *à la marinère, à la Provençale, à la béarnaise, à la poulette*; she loved them in salads, soups, pilafs and sauces. “One of the many things I love about French cooking,” she said, was the way that basic themes could be made in a seemingly infinite number of variations – scalloped potatoes, say, could be done with milk and cheese, with carrots and cream, with beef stock and cheese, with onions and tomatoes, and so on and on. I wanted to try them all, and did.” With a little of Julia’s sense of adventure, I could have *tried* to enjoy the mussel omelet. But...*bleh!* In *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, her love sonnet to “one of the world’s great arts,” she says:

We have purposely omitted cobwebbed bottles, the *patron* in his white cap bustling among his sauces, anecdotes about charming little restaurants with gleaming napery, and so forth. Such romantic interludes, it seems to us, put French cooking into a never-never land instead of Here, where happily it is available to everybody.

But what if there is one *everybody* for whom “Here,” in Paris, actually *is* never-never land? As in, never-never will I eat whatever ends up baked, broiled, grilled or rôti

from the entire left half of the creature of field or forest (head, hoof and tail included) that hangs woebegone on the wall of the outdoor market in my Paris *quartier*. And never-never will I dine on those poor things dragged from the sea, pried off of rocks, scraped from piers or ripped from shells, although M.F.K. herself might sympathize. One spring of 1936, she writes in *The Art of Eating*, “I met a young servant in northern Burgundy who was almost fanatical about food, like a medieval woman possessed by the devil.”

Like my sister, Candice.

It’s Christmas Eve and she and I are sharing an intimate table for two at Le Grand Colbert near the Palais Royale. The classic Paris brasserie of stylish zinc bar and black-and-white tile floor is holiday festive with white twinkly lights festooned all around; Christmas trees gilded in a grand manner bedazzle every corner. Candy and I are giddy with excitement. *Together in Paris for Christmas!* And we are eager to celebrate the season with a spectacular experience. But, obviously, my fanaticism in avoiding meals of life forms I prefer remain alive is matched only by the intensity with which my sister savors her *fruits de mer*. Candy is possessed of something, it’s true. I suspect it’s that strange magic of France embodied by the country’s cooking. It’s the same voodoo that utterly bewitched M.F.K. in her day. Remembering one of her first meals in Dijon, where she as a newlywed lived two years, she writes: “That first night, as I think back on it, was amazing.... Everything that was brought to the table was so new, so wonderfully cooked, that what might have been with sated palates a gluttonous orgy was, for our fresh ignorance, a constant refreshment.” What’s more, the “charmed gastronomic circle” in which she and her bridegroom, Al, found themselves only amps the intoxication.

After dinner, [w]hen we finally went home to unlock the little door for the first time and go up the zigzag stairs to our own room, we wove a bit perhaps. But we felt as if we had seen the far shores of another world. We were drunk with the land breeze that blew from it, and the sure knowledge that it lay waiting for us.

My tipsy sister is only one glass of Bordeaux down, and her apparent, well, *happiness*, is a land breeze of something I don't quite understand. She is gorging herself on dinner – with a pin. This implement the waiter provided with her order, which stands in the center of the table: a towering, four-tiered tray of crushed ice upon which are nestled every possible “fruit” from the sea. These are creatures that suction to rocks or crawl on sand bottoms, locomote with many, many legs, or, if their shells are not steamed open a tease, brandish antenna like the feelers of beetle or whiskers of kitten. *Écrevisses*, or crayfish, mussels and snails, clams and small crabs – there are skinny shrimp, husky prawns and, of course, the pretty periwinkle sea snail, known to the culinary universe as a gourmet gastropod mollusk. Each sea-fruit's delicacy is hidden within its shell, and it is only by pin – painstakingly maneuvered and worked with the patience of a saint, that Candy gets anything to eat. Already, 90 minutes into our meal, I have polished off my soup, salad, soufflé *aux épinards*, and our demi-platter of cheeses to share. Our table's basket of baguette, refilled twice, is empty due to my doing alone, and the waiter knows I'll take for dessert the bittersweet chocolate profiteroles. Meanwhile, Candy pins out a microscopic bit of crustacean – she has one entire tier to go – chews it slowly as if it's more than a mere mite of a bite, and...there it is: the exact same swoon that likely moved Julia to declare, “Paris is heavenly.... I think, more than ever, that I shall never get over Paris, and never find anyplace more to my tastes. Everything about it satisfies everything

in me....” This included, of course, “the food I had fallen in love with.” Candy, savoring what can’t be more than a snail trail, looks to be feeling just this side of Julia’s heaven.

“Don’t talk to me.” After the next pinhead’s worth of sea creature she closes her eyes for a moment and communes privately with some crayfish innards. After a pause she’s back, poised to pin the next miniscule mouthful taken from something that has three pair of legs and two of antenna. “I can’t believe you don’t want to try this. It tastes like the sea, on a sunny day when the salt-spray scents the air with the pleasures of senses...friends...together....” She disappears into her reverie.

I don’t believe her. I’m certain the dinner that takes Candy two hours to eat, totals 94 calories, and costs practically the price of those fabulous boots we saw yesterday at Printemps – which I’d rather have – is a scam devised by France’s foodies to fool eaters for whom the word “delicacy” means *uh-oh, be afraid – be very afraid*. Are we really to believe fruits from the sea have magical, perhaps romantic powers?

Julia thought so. “What fun! What a revelation!” she said of the spell French “cookery” cast on her. “How magnificent to find my life’s calling, at long last!” M.F.K., too, was seduced by French food to the farthest reaches of a palate so far reaching it got to such signature recipes as Oyster Catsup and Tomato Soup Cake without once stopping to think, well, *bleh*. “The *bouillabaisse* sent up its own saffrony steam,” she writes of the memorable meal she and her husband once enjoyed in the Old Port of Marseilles before boarding a ship home to the States. “We mopped and dunked at its sauces, and sucked a hundred strange dead creatures from their shells. We were trying not to wonder,” she adds, “how we could bear to leave this land.”

Candy finally sucks out the guts of her last *écrivisse*. “Enough!” She throws down her pin and falls back into her chair, exhausted. She eyes the empty baguette basket, the decimated cheese plate, the *assiette* of spinach soufflé licked clean of even the last globule of butter – my dinner, in short – and wakes from the trance of otherworld spun from the *fruits de mer*.

“Was that good?” I search my spent sister’s face for a sign that she is sated by the sea and the salt and the spray and the friends that...what was it? I can’t imagine how her meal was worth all the work, although silvery tiers of ice stand on so many other diners’ tables that I am forced to concede only this: Fools are out in force Christmas Eve at Le Grand Colbert. Two minutes pass. The waiter mentions the chocolate profiteroles are on their way. “Thank God!” says Candy. “I’m so hungry I could eat the place down.”

“Well, you know what Mom always says.” I can see in my sister the same huge relief – huge! – I feel those times in France I find that starving to death is not necessarily an option. “You mean how you get what you get?” She knows. The waiter arrives with our profiteroles and we both brighten and exclaim with glee, *Merci!* From a silver server he pours the hot bittersweet chocolate over the pastry puffs plump with vanilla ice cream. We practically sing in sisterly unison, “And you’re grateful!” We laugh for we really are.

Fatty livers of force-fed geese – aka pâté, pigeon in Madeira sauce, veal knuckles, calf’s feet and thymus glands braised, creamed, sautéed or *à l’Italienne*. The French, admits Julia in awe and admiration, “will eat almost anything.” To wit, the “wild hares and rabbits hung whole” that greet shoppers at market, along with “haunches of elk, wild boar and venison...presented with hoof and fur intact.” This is simple, honest food that

French people positively party over, says Julia. “Not trendy, souped-up fantasies. Just something very good to eat.”

So here I am at Châlet des Iles, the 1880 Swiss chalet-now-restaurant found on a little lake island in the Bois de Boulogne. The chalet was Napoleon III’s gift to the Empress Eugénie before it became a favorite haunt of Proust and Zola. And despite the exciting provenance of the place, I am searching high and low for *something very good to eat*. We are lunching al fresco, my parents and I, and it is my birthday. Peacocks stroll the lushly landscaped grounds; swans swim to and fro on the sun-shimmery lake; migrating Canadian geese squawk in the aquamarine sky above: All in all, it’s a gorgeous scene that makes the day feel especially, well, special. *In Paris for my birthday!* The menu is French. Very. Julia-food is the only offering, with plenty of M.F.K.-approved entrees; that is, if she had included them in her book *How To Cook a Wolf*.

“I’m sorry, darling.” Dad sees from *la carte* of course upon course – appetizers to post-coffee cordials – that no vegetarian option will be served at Châlet des Iles in this lifetime. He, however, is ecstatic over the prospect of a decadent *caneton rôti* (roast duckling) that I am woe-filled to worry might be snatched from the very lake beside which we dine. Mom is okay with the prawn soufflé as long as the heads are cut off.

“Oh, it’s fine. I can always find *something* on the menu.” I am in high spirits – it’s my birthday! And to celebrate with my cherished parents here in Paris means it won’t matter, really, what I order for lunch. It’s going to be wonderful no matter what. Unless it isn’t. The menu seems to feature only gourmet barnyard horrors, all proudly –

if grimly – described in exquisite calligraphy. There are no sides of risotto or rice or pretty red potatoes, no little plate of anything not once furred or feathered or loved by a mother.

“Madame?” The waiter hovers, sans pencil. He is prepared to remember our order to the chef who, I can only imagine, is, like Julia, Le Cordon Bleu-trained to begin today’s meal preparation with a beheading of Dad’s duck. I despair over my ordering options. Somehow a meal of bread and butter seems un-birthday-like. “*S’il vous plait.*”

“Well.” I stall for time. But then, a bold, rogue idea enters my mind – it must be some birthday bravura. “*S’il vous plait, Monsieur.*” I struggle to use my best French accent so as not to offend the server who, surely, is descended in some cosmic way from the waitress M.F.K. once encountered in an old mill-turned-restaurant in Burgundy. After the writer places her order for a bottle of 1929 Chablis, she recalls: “For a second her whole face blazed with joy and then subsided into a trained mask. I knew that I had chosen well, had somehow satisfied her in a secret and incomprehensible way.”

I so wish, secretly and incomprehensibly, to please this waiter, although I know I won’t. My abject rejection of the menu that cover to cover is a cornucopia of elite eats the French are typically cuckoo for – from steak tartar topped with raw egg to frogs’ legs *au poivre* – is an affront famous eaters like M.F.K. would never have dared. She writes of her conversation with the server in that Burgundy restaurant where she met Monsieur Paul’s glad trout.

‘Perhaps a leaf or two of salad after the fish,’ I suggested. She almost snapped at me. “Of course, of course! And naturally our *hors d’oeuvres* to commence.’ She started away.

‘No!’ I called, feeling that I must assert myself now or be forever lost.
‘No!’

She turned back and spoke to me very gently. “But Madame has never tasted our *hors d’oeuvres*. I am sure that Madame will be pleased. They are our specialty, made by Monsieur Paul himself. I am sure,’ and she looked reproachfully at me, her mouth tender and sad, ‘I am sure Madame would be very much pleased.’

I smiled weakly at her, and she left. A little cloud of hurt gentleness seemed to hang in the air where she last stood.

...

Hell! I loathed *hors d’oeuvres*!

But of course she eats the *hors d’oeuvres* Monsieur Paul prepares. And she is not just pleased, but *very*.

So I brave it: “Would it be possible for the chef to make something vegetarian for me?” I don’t really believe the waiter’s face will ignite in a blaze of joy, but the last thing I expect is his response. He does not snicker; he does not sneer; he reproaches me not. He doesn’t even sigh in sadness that I am missing out on a gourmet decapitated duck or the big gray bird on the farm that met its unhappy end. “*Oui, Madame,*” he says and bows off.

Oui?

When lunch is served among the peacocks in full parade display – they stroll past our table with their fabulous tail feathers fanned in a brilliance of aqua, gold and green – it actually happens. Julia? M.F.K.? I may be late to the celebration, but here I am.

Dad gets his sumptuous duckling, Mom her headless prawn soufflé, and I? I am served a vegetarian version of gastronomic rhapsody.

“*Voilà.*” The waiter presents my plate with a formal flourish and beams. “The chef’s best.” He winks in the way of French flirts who are particularly proud and pleased

with themselves. Flounced by edible Nasturtiums in brilliant sunset colors, my lunch looks so beautiful, so luscious, so filled with veggie-rich little dishes that I am breathless before the spectacle. Baked fennel fragrant with vermouth; mushrooms in puff pastry coddled by a tarragon-infused crème fraîche. Balsamic-roasted veggies. Even herbed lentils with a sprinkle of Dijon citronette. There are two or three *petits pâté à la sage* – mini cakes of fresh sage – and a creamy cauliflower something that looks absolutely, as Julia might say, “Marvelous.” The chef’s best, made especially for me, is a birthday gift that is complete only at dessert, when I am served a *coupe* of Champagne and a slice of celebration cheesecake topped by a sparkler that comes to the table lit like the Eiffel Tower.

“Happy birthday!” my parents toast. Nobody sings *happy birthday to you* – not at Châlet des Iles, not in this lifetime – but beyond our table, beneath a fanfare of hanging flowers, and behind a small ivy hedge that cordons off the kitchen, I glimpse a tall fellow in a toque: the chef. Is he looking in my direction? Why yes, yes! He is looking in my direction! More or less. I want to blow him a kiss that can cross the distance between us, but...no. Instead I simply admit, in awe and admiration, that French cooking has come for me, even me, and I am not just pleased but *very*.

“When Paul and I returned to Paris from England to celebrate the New Year, 1950, I almost wept with relief and pleasure,” remembers Julia. “Oh, how I *adored* sweet and natural France, with its human warmth, wonderful smells, graciousness, coziness and freedom of spirit!”

Now I understand, Julia and M.F.K. At last, I got what I got. And I am grateful.

MY MOTHER'S HOUSE

In my mother's house, everything is just so. The apartment in the heart of Paris, on a street named for its Eiffel Tower view, *is* my mother. Never mind how its windows overlook not the Eiffel Tower at all, but rather the rain-stained, shadow-dappled wall of the building next door, and that its tiny size makes it a mouse hole, really. It is her dream of eons, her girlhood desire made real (at last!) after a lifetime as wife and mother and long-distance lover of France and, especially, the City of Light. That life, the one in which she, California-born, raised me and my four brothers and sisters in a San Francisco suburb that held little for her when compared with her dream of Paris, is mere memory now. Now, her longings of long ago live. *I will stroll by the Seine at sunset*, she'd say when, as a child, I'd watch her iron the mountain of laundry that was, as a 1960s-era housewife, her job. *I will sip Champagne in a sidewalk café and eat nothing but cream-frilled French pastries*. Today, she does. Today, when spending part of the year in her Paris apartment my mother is home. And in my mother's house, everything is just so.

I am Colette, her eldest. And because for a time I am living in my mother's house, I am very, very careful.

"The house was large, topped by a lofty garret," it begins. "A large solemn house, rather forbidding, with its shrill bell and its carriage-entrance with a huge bolt like an ancient dungeon, a house that smiled only on its garden side."

I close the book and look around. August. It is hot in Paris – blistering hot – so as I lie in the iron trundle bed of my mother's house, I feel it's all right to laze around a little and read. I am deep into *My Mother's House* by Colette, the French writer after

whom I am named. It's a memoir of her family life in 1880s rural France and how it does impress! In *her* mother's house, for instance, the French Colette as a child does not see what this Colette does: foreboding in the guise of perfection. Painted in happy California colors of pale party pink and soft, sea-shine green, the walls of my mother's house enclose a jewel box of a home where each and every item to her is a treasure. Across the room is the weathered antique armoire that my mother hauled home in a hundred pieces from the *marché aux puces*, reassembled by hand and painted the white and gray of Wedgwood to disguise its flea market past. And here, above the trundle in which I recline on a great pouf of pillows, are the ancient prints of pretty *Parisiennes* – dressed for a ball, feathers on their heads – that my mother retrieved from the dusty depths of a shop by the Seine and painstakingly reframed herself. Now the *Parisiennes* in feathers revel in their refurbished flirtatiousness. The pink tulips in a cracked yet beautiful cachepot on a table; the lovely ivy topiaries arranged to exquisite advantage on the mantle; the flowered antique dishes mounted artfully – painstakingly – on the foyer walls. In this house each thing, every inch, tells the story of my mother's Paris adventures. From the fresh white sofa in the *salon* bought at a clearance sale, to the faux-gold mirror in the bath that was scavenged from a crumbling country château, evidence of the decorative arts that she executes so very, very well speak of nothing so much as the love my mother has lavished on her home, on her dream, here in Paris.

Alas, here I am.

I have fled California with two cats and no future as far as I can tell. The past? Does it matter? Littered as it is with so many dead-end jobs and spirit-breaking men, it

hardly sparkles. My mother has invited me to retreat to her Paris pied-a-terre to regroup, to begin again, and I have brought my cat box and my confusion – both symptomatic of the threat I am to the clean and pretty order, to the happy and hopeful heaven that is my mother’s house. Here, in rooms so obviously fashioned from passion, a burning rose candle offers its sweet scent. And I wonder, what now? I worry, what next? And especially: I contemplate with mounting woe: how will we – Fifi, Lulu and I – survive my mother’s house? That is to say, how will it survive us?

Turning back to Colette, I read that while in *her* mother’s house, the writer dared to express a fearless, unfettered exuberance. She writes of what she would like for dinner: “I, bounding into the air because I so often forget that I am past fifteen, will clamour for ‘fried potatoes! Fried potatoes! And walnuts with cheese!’” I turn the page and... uh-oh, accidentally send a huge gray mug of green tea toppling off the bedside table.

Here we go.

A large, growing blob of ominous stain now darkens the sisal rug of my borrowed room. Time for me, too, to bound. Paper towels! Paper towels! And a big sponge with cleaner! I race to the kitchen, scurry back and in a panic mop up what I can. I know at once: I will have to replace the rug. Quickly. Quietly. Before my mother can discover it, I will kill myself searching hither and yon around the arrondissements until I find the exact size and style. I will be forced to save every *centime* until I can outlay its expense. Eventually, I will sweat to bring home the huge, unwieldy thing via the Métro. No doubt I’ll knock other passengers upside the head with it as I struggle to maneuver the Métro’s

many tunnels, as I stagger up its many steps. And of my mother's now-ruined rug? I will hide it behind the winter coats in the closet – yes. Until I muster the courage to confess.

Were we to trade places, the French Colette likely wouldn't fret that my mother's kitchen, tiny as it is, is a potential hodge-podge of problems. The writer's *papa*, who routinely made chocolate, would put the soft bricks to dry on the family's equally tiny terrace and, she writes, "every morning they showed, printed on them like flowers with five hollow petals, the trails of the nocturnal cats." That my Fifi will nap curled on my mother's counter while the dishwasher hums soothingly beneath her...well, something like that wouldn't faze the French Colette in the least. Why, in *her* mother's house the cats – with kittens! – spilled from baskets, kept house in cupboards, and catwalked all over, from chocolate-tops to bookshelf bottoms. What's more, Colette's mother Sido kept (and conversed with) a pet spider, rehabilitated injured (if not dying) mice, and once, with great tenderness, cared for a caterpillar until it flew off a butterfly. Sido was a stout and capable country woman with a fierce protective love of her garden and every critter at home there. Surely she would not find it a fright – it: The very thing I now spy as I return to my mother's kitchen: A hairball! There to my horror it lies, limp in a slimy pool of spit – a hairy blob of disgrace on the handsome hardwood counter.

Fifi, shame! I gently scold the offender, clean up the goo and consider the stain. *How will we explain this?* Like the jobs that haven't fulfilled me and the romances, like this last, gone bad, Fifi's failing like my own leaves a permanent blot, hers on the counter, mine on my soul. The two of us step out of the kitchen and sit, dejected, in the flowered *salon*. In this, the apartment's main room, my mother's pretty chintz-covered

loveseat suits me oh-so-comfortably. Fifi chooses to curl her sorry self on the cream silk-covered chair with the sweet swinging tassels of green. Will we be forgiven?

Not that when, in three days, my mother arrives for a six-week stay her place better be shipshape *or else*. It's just that her house holds so much of her happiness in its treasures, in its pleasures, that my missteps and imperfections strike me, in this context, as crimes against her contentment, yes, and also the potential for my own. *How will I ever be this happy?* There is, for instance, the fanciful fixture that hangs from the ceiling to light the salon. The evening my mother successfully, against all odds, hung it, lit it *and* got the doodad that dims it to work saw her giddy for practically days. As it twinkles before my eyes, the fixture's star-like lights convey a certain joy still. There is also the French frou-frou on the salon ceiling corners, molding that's carved into a pretty trala of design. This, too, gave her thrills of accomplishment the day it was painted crisp, fresh white and became to my mother as beautiful as any work of art in the Louvre. I take this in, too. Did she know in advance that her dream would be in the details?

It might be the whitewashed oak floors that Pierre the Parisian craftsman spent days, *weeks*, sanding, bleaching and staining to the exact shade of my mother's specifications. Or the tiny fireplace with its mini iron grate. How many months of flea market cruising and browsing in shops from Montmartre to Montparnasse did it take my mother to select the grate of correct size and shape! It might even be the silver candelabra (surely forged in Louis the Fourteenth's day) that was such an exciting flea market find she could have fainted from joy. The décor of my mother's house, so painstakingly selected and proudly placed, speaks so strongly of her talent and her style,

that as I gaze upon it all I hear her loud and clear: *Happiness is a beautiful home*, she's saying. *Especially when it's in Paris*. If she's also saying *Look, but don't touch*, it's only to me. And that's only because I, with my rug stain, hairballs and all, so fear being a blight on her bliss here in the City of Light that I imagine the worst: my mother's house irretrievably trashed *and I powerless to prevent it*. The conversation thus flows between us, but then: I am stunned to see something dares to interrupt. Lulu.

She has spoken: There, on the face of my mother's Wedgwood-painted armoire, are ten long, deep scratches. Paint flakes off around each gash. And the wound can be seen from clear across the room. *Bad Lulu!* I weakly reprimand my oblivious kitty, who lies stretched to her length in the happy spot of sun she finds on the sisal carpet.

Whatever will I do with you, Lulu? And really: *Whatever will I do with me!* I have quit my job and plundered my savings to spend as many months as the money holds out re-finding myself in Paris. I have no idea where I want to live, what I want to do, much less with whom. So I am overflowing with hope that the City of Light will, with its sense of magic and aura of romance, inspire me anew and illumine my path. What's more, I secretly expect that the city at the center of my mother's universe to do for me what it has done for her – prove that the dead ends of my past are really the mulch of my fabulous future, a future that starts *now*. If only I can remain in my mother's good graces while staying in her well-loved house. Lulu's job on the armoire casts doubt.

How did the French Colette so thrive while under the roof of *her* mother's house? Well, for one, she positively lived for its domestic adventures. "All was faery and yet simple among the fauna of my early home," she writes.

I learned how infinitely a tame swallow can surpass, in insolent sociability, even the most pampered of dogs. Our two swallows spent their time perching on a shoulder or head, nestling in the work basket, running about under the table like chickens, pecking at the nonplussed dog or chirping in the very face of the disconcerted cat.

Even with a bird on her head the French Colette loved, as did her mother, every inch of their home; she did not care in the least if her childhood messes did offend, whether it was the mud she tracked-in from the garden, or the bugs and slugs she kept indoors as pets. She felt safe in her mother's house, and was a thread of its very fabric as beloved as the swallows napping in the work basket. Colette grew into a woman, a writer, who knew her place in the scheme. The literary worlds she conjured in novels like *Claudine à l'Ecole* (1900) and *Chéri* (1920) exposed the bold, even greedy pleasure she took in words well crafted, relationships well savored, food well prepared – in a word, in life well lived. In the midst of my life mess – all grown up with no home or family or even clear dream of my own, I would thrill to feel more like the French Colette's bird-pecked dog: nonplussed. And, in the way of her disconcerted cat, it would be wonderful indeed to live embraced by the love in my mother's house – forever. The author writes of such perfect contentment, that which she felt in Sido's sitting room:

...with the flora of cut branches and its fauna of peaceful creatures; the echoing house, dry and warm and crackling as a newly-baked loaf; the garden, the village...Beyond these all is danger, all is loneliness.

Beyond my own mother's salon: danger, indeed. Down a narrow hall of my mother's house lies the bathroom. Not the *toilette*, a closed-in closet where the toilet is kept, but the *salle de bain* where is found a sink and a tub sized to suit a toddler. How big a disaster will it be, exactly, that when I attempt to stuff my adult body into the tub I

crash against the glass soap holder and break it into a rain of sharp shards? And how big a deal will it be, precisely, that in ineptly managing the hand-held shower nozzle (its wiles those of a wild snake), I drench the bathroom's walls so disastrously that a rivulet runs out beneath the door – a rivulet that eventually warps a few hall floorboards?

From my comfy spot on the loveseat I consider all this *and* the nice, white ottoman to my left that, *well, of course*, my cats have fuzzed with a forest of cast-off black fur. Here's an idea: What if I just sprawl, limp and listless, on this loveseat for eons. Get a job, how? Find a home, where? Meet a man...impossible! *And now there's cat fur for my mother.* As it is I must – must! – rouse myself, dress, and venture out. Certainly Paris with its boulevards bursting with adventure will ignite a fire in me to fix it all, both for myself and my mom. Certainly its museums and parks, its shops and sights will restore in me that *je ne sais quoi* I lost before coming to my mother's house and its promise of both a change of scene and a change of me. Ah, to be new! The City of Light with its bars and bistros and *boulangeries*, its strolls by the Seine and its gardens and art surely will show me home – home to a dream of my own. My mother always had Paris. And I? Well, I never dared envision a fantasy so grand. And now, now as I share in hers by parking my potential on her beautiful *pouf* of a loveseat pillow, I so hope Paris works for me, too. Somehow.

But first, just one more chapter.

My mother smelled of laundered cretonne, of irons heated on a poplar-wood fire, of lemon-verbena leaves which she rolled between her palms or thrust into her pocket. At nightfall I used to imagine that she smelled of newly washed lettuces, for the refreshing scent of them would follow her footsteps to the rippling sound of the rain from the watering-can, in a glory of spray and tillable dust.

I put down my book, close my eyes and try to capture my own mother's scent. Might it hint of lavender, like that joy of fragrant potpourri that fills a Sèvres porcelain bowl on the table beside me? Or possibly Dux, the French laundry soap that faintly scents the starched pink pillow on which I recline? Whether a whiff of Oscar, her perfume, or a sniff of rose in her lotion, all my nose knows is that the strongest scent now that wafts throughout my mother's house is that of the cat box. The cat box! I could die.

I tromp to the *toilette*, site of the sin, and see that Fifi and Lulu have had a feline free-for-all with the litter. Said smelly sand is flung in catty abandon all over the floor. Bored. My outdoor cats, now locked inside, far from trees to climb or a garden to explore, are making of my mother's house playtime pandemonium.

A broom won't do; I'll need the vacuum.

French, this contraption is fashioned from foreign things: knobs and levers and wheels that work in a weird French way. I fiddle and fumble and have no luck getting the plug-in cord to pull-out from its foreign housing – that is, until I yank for all I'm worth and slam the vacuum against the door of the closet in which it is stored. A gash! There is now an actual gash of raw, splintered wood in the pristine white paint, a gash I can't imagine how to fix – a gash that, like my aimless life of the moment, fills me with woe.

What will Mom do when she sees that! Given my “care” of her home so far, it won't be any wonder if she wants to lock me in the closet – ha! – until the date of my flight home. But she won't. The closet, after all, is not big enough for me *and the ruined rug* both. Plus, this is not my mother's style. Her spunk may not rival that of Colette's

mother, who once insulted the village curé when he gently suggested she not bring her mongrel spaniel to Mass. Mass, he suggested, was not said for dogs: “My Dog!” she retorted, shocked. “Turn my dog out of church! What are you afraid he may learn there?” But my mother has her ways of making me suffer. Yes, I would sooner endure a thousand self-inflicted lashes with the shower nozzle than hurt her sensitive feelings in any way. So with the vacuum I suck up the cat-sand and consider: how I can make it up to her? The French Colette honored *her* mother by remaining to the end of her life loving, loyal and utterly forgiving of her every foible. Like the time Sido, mistress of a thriving, verdant garden, refused to give a dear, newly widowed friend even a single flower. “My moss-roses on a corpse!” Sido fairly spat when asked if she might help beautify the deceased’s casket. “What an outrage!”

That my mother’s particular well-being is nurtured by paint that gleams and floors not sticky with ick and, certainly, a vacuum with an on/off knob that, however foreign it is, remains in one piece...well, there we are. I now have broken off the knob! In wrenching the forever-on vacuum off, dammit, OFF, I have really done it. And I wonder: how I, too, can be the loyal, loving daughter who honors her mom when the havoc being wreaked upon her home obviously does not. To repay the great faith she shows by encouraging me to live for however long I like in her treasured Paris place, I best get my act together fast – at least – to prove to her and myself that her gift is not something she regrets giving.

It’s nearly noon and I have yet to dress. A vacuum-cleaner repairman – here he will be a *monsieur* – is added to my errand list. It sits on the foyer table, this list, next to

my laptop computer. Now, there's some bad news. Last night when I tried to get the Internet modem working a fuse blew. So now the foyer is dim, nay *dark*, and I am unschooled for the job of fuse repair. My mother, who can fix a fuse as easily as she can a sandwich will laugh at my ineptitude, so I vow she never finds out. What to do, what to do! Maybe that other, that *clued-in* Colette can offer a helpful suggestion.

Of course, she never had a computer and when young traveled – incredible, as it seems now – by horse-and-“Victoria.” Still, the writer was exceptionally capable. At age eight she could throw down many a “thimbleful” of hot wine when accompanying her father to the village tavern, where he would hold forth on local politics. As a teen she knew enough to stay away from “low acquaintances.” And by young adulthood she already knew what was what when it came to romance. “For a full week,” Colette remembers, “I was cantankerous, jealous, pale and full of blushes – in other words, I was in love.” Her swain? A certain monsieur named Maurice.

Of course! Colette's confession causes me to remember another of my mother's treasures: the small painting of courting lovers who stroll the Luxembourg Gardens. Beneath the artwork that hangs in her bedroom, bingo: the desk drawer that holds this apartment's instructions. This is a small notebook noting whom to call and what to do in the event of this or that. Relieved, I head for the instructions. Alas, I might have arrived. I might have found my mother's notes in her swoopy, careful hand, found the fuse fixed eventually by my own lights, found my life on its way to fulfilling the unnamed dream I have come to Paris to find. I might, that is, if I hadn't instead met Fifi in the hall. In her mouth, sweet Jesus: a green tassel. The silk-covered chair from which it was ripped now

sits in my mother's salon in a sadness of utter ruin. Shreds of cream-colored silk hang from the seat. Mere fragments of tassel swing. Lulu lies nearby looking greatly satisfied, and the fantastic cat-fun that she and Fifi have enjoyed shows in the slum of a chair so beyond repair that only my mother herself can help it now.

Yes, there is no hiding this.

The day has practically passed and I, here reading in my mother's house, have yet to get out into Paris. My own dream indeed may lie just outside the massive red doors that open onto the street from the apartment's garden courtyard – doors with which my mother fell hopelessly in love the moment she saw them. *A coup de foudre*, the French say. Love at first sight. *This is it*, she knew, just *knew* at the sight of the doors. This would be *the* apartment out of the many she'd considered that would see her life's bright hope unfurl in a blaze of renovation and decoration. This would be the place that best expressed her spirit at its most happy and creative. My own spirit sinks in the face of my challenge now. How will I ever patch and fix, correct and clean the marring of my mother's dream? In time? “You wouldn't believe it, but I fell downstairs!” Colette's mother tells her one day. “Were you going down too quickly?” “Too quickly? What do you call too quickly? I was going down quickly. Have I time to go downstairs majestically like the Sun King?”

I'm sorry but my mother is going to *freak* when she sees how the cats and I essentially have pooped on her *coup de foudre*. Beginning now, I best move around my mother's house like Sido should have around hers – Sun-Kingly, in *my* best majestic fashion. Never mind that, like unruly subjects, the ways of this house seem determined to

challenge my rule. There is the prospect that, though I sit serenely, queenly, at the kitchen table, its trinket size soon enough will see my breakfast glass of juice crash to the floor in yet more showers of glass shards. And there is the potential that, though I properly, princess-ly, pull my day's outfit from its hangar in the armoire, a loose loop of thread will catch on the armoire's key which will jiggle the door which will wobble the top on which a large, thriving fern is perched. The fern no doubt is perched precariously for *no!* There it will go, crashing to the floor in plops of dirt flung everywhere. The broken-down vacuum will glare at me from its heap of misery in the corner, daring me to deal with this, yet another catastrophe.

With the thought of it there is nothing to do now but take to my bed. With Colette.

In *her* mother's house, life was not so very different from mine. She remembers:

[My mother] raised her arms to heaven and ran to the door. As she went she caught the cord of her pince-nez round the key of a drawer, then the ribbon of her lorgnette in the latch of the door, and entangled her knitted shawl in the Gothic intricacies of a Second Empire chair.

In Colette's mother's house, the furniture also got in the way; the cats created havoc with their play; and one very devoted daughter worried that she would never grow into a woman with as many gifts and abilities, with as much love and generosity as she perceived in the mother she adored.

My own story still may turn out as well as Colette's. There is yet time to prove that Paris for me will be fraught not with disaster, *appearances notwithstanding*, but instead blessed by hope. Hope that I find a vision of my future. Hope that my time in the great City of Light is worthy of the faith my mother has shown by sharing her dream with

me. Hope that I locate the very best vacuum-repair *monsieur* in Paris. As for the fern on the floor and the tassel with the cat; the broken this, the ruined that... Well, tomorrow is another day. Even Colette, when she left her mother's house to marry, didn't remove her presence from *everything*. She left a few choice objects in her well-loved room: A dog bed – fuzzed with fur. A birdcage full of feathers. Hair ribbons. A silver filigree ring.

When I leave my mother's house – to do what? I wonder – I will leave something too: the curious scratch a cat has etched in the whitewashed floor. If I look at it crooked it resembles a heart.

LA SEDUCTION, INTERRUPTED

We sat in the *salon* and talked of what went wrong. Heartbreak had happened, for sure, but Candy couldn't convince me a love life in Paris would be much better than the mess I left in San Francisco. There, my boyfriend shed me like his head had his hair – unattractively, which left a bad, bald spot in my self-esteem. While my sister was being romanced by several hot *messieurs* of good French family during the time we spent in the City of Light, Paris promised little in the love department for me, I argued, unless. Unless I shook off my woe and whooped it up a little. This is what Candy suggested. If I could bounce back from my break-up *toute suite*, in a heartbeat, she said, I might fall head over heels myself. Why? Because, she said, romance and France go together like...

“Like Michael and I!” I wailed and started to cry at the ex's mere mention.

“No,” said Candy in the cooing voice she uses on pathetic sisters only. “Like a baguette and butter. Like a boulevardier and his beret. Like the Eiffel Tower and...”

“Stop it,” I sobbed.

On the tiny plaid sofa in the toile-papered room in the sixth-floor flat on the street in Passy where we lived, the two of us hugged. She continued.

“Really, look around. Here in Paris, *everyone* is in love.”

“Not me,” I snuffled.

“Kissers are always kissing in cafés, hand-holders are everywhere, strolling. Go to any park like the Luxembourg Gardens...”

“I don't want to,” I hiccupped.

“...and there they are: nothing but smoochers of cheeks, patters of fannies and, sitting on laps by the lawn, couple after couple overcome with the hots who can’t keep their hands off each other.”

True. Paris did seem to carry an air of seduction, whether it was the pink swoony glow of sunset, the merry clink of Champagne glasses in the cafés crammed with people laughing, or our neighborhood at night – its intimate bistros candlelit and cozy, the music soft and low. My tears flowed and flowed.

“Oh, please,” said my sister. “Snap out of it. Paris is the city of love. Why not get in on it. Everyone *else* is.” She did have a point. And really, I had to wonder, what is it about the City of Light that makes it so conducive to Seine-side strolls *à deux*, to tête-a-têtes with an Eiffel Tower view – to flirting and fondling and fun? If only I could understand Paris’s predilection for passion and romance! Then maybe I, in time, might find my *own* fanny patted. By a sexy Frenchman no less.

Just then, the foyer buzzer buzzed. Candy tossed me a last tissue and opened the door to Martine, the *coiffeuse* from up the street.

“*Salut, les filles,*” said Martine. The hairdresser was one of my sister’s sexiest French friends and stood there flaunting a big, bouncy bosom in her very décolleté tee.

Martine’s “hi girls” prompted us to reply as one: “*Bonjour, Martine.*” But it was the woman arm-in-arm with Martine who next spoke.

“Hi, I’m Meg,” twanged the petite brunette, her accent possibly Texan? Meg, fresh from the hairdresser’s chair, glowed with her new auburn highlights; she was invited by Martine to meet us, she said, because we were American, too.

“Hi, Meg,” said Candy, and showed our guests to the *salon*. Martine flopped onto the tiny, plaid sofa, Meg dropped into the petite loveseat, and both, when offered tea and some warm apple Tarte Tatin, said *oui! oui!* And “please.”

“*Alors,*” said Martine in her native French. “It was *so* wonderful.”

What was so wonderful?

Launching what looked like a good gossip-fest, Martine asked Candy please to translate for Meg, who spoke not a word of French.

“Okay, sure,” said my sister. “Well, it was *so* wonderful.”

“After a very romantic dinner at my place with too much Champagne,” recounted the *raconteur* in French, “Claude smiled at me over the *crème caramel* and with that look, you know, said, ‘Martine?’”

Ah, a story of seduction. We all perked up.

“After a very intimate dinner at her place with too much Champagne,” echoed Candy, but in English, “he smiled at her over the *crème caramel* and with that look, you know, said, ‘Martine?’” Meg, last to get in on the understanding, lit up brighter than her highlights when she got where the story was going.

“Go on!” she urged, the dimmer knob of her curiosity dialing up.

“‘Martine, your eyes are like azure diamonds so beautifully they shine,’ he said, and I could feel his gaze dissolve me,” the French girl sighed.

“So he complimented her eyes – something about something azure, I think – and she felt like she might pass out,” translated my sister, striving for accuracy. This would be tough, I had to admit, getting right the pretty mix of idiom, proverb and euphemism

that Martine's native French presented. As even the lovelorn like me knew, *le français* is a romance language. When the world's first man, Monsieur Adam, got mixed up with Mademoiselle Eve over that fateful *pomme*, it was a faux pas that thenceforth necessitated their having to cover their naked shame with something awfully chic and preferably couture, hence, the beginnings of French fashion as we know it today. It also kicked-off a language that has evolved into an actual art form. Lofty. Lovely. French has become something of a prose poem.

To wit: As Martine talked and the Tarte Tatin disappeared, I flashed on my first breakfast in France years ago. It was then I learned my cornflakes, that bland bowl of blah that begs for spoonfuls of sugar, translates into French as a collection of corn "petals" – the image alone invoking nothing so much as a sweet arrangement of blooms for the cereal bowl. Then there was the label in my hotel bathrobe. This common wrap of terrycloth – at best hot stuff for a slattern or *hausfrau* – is one step up from a towel in sensuality. But in French, ah in French, the bathrobe is reborn a "peignoir." It hints of something sexy. Something see-through. Something, perhaps, that flutters ostrich feathers? What's more, the French do not walk the dog, but, rather, "promenade" with him. Police do not arrest, but instead "invite" lawbreakers to jail. Clearly, when discussion in France turns to love, it has to follow: the way people talk is no less frou-frou than ostrich feathers themselves.

No wonder she struggled to get it exactly. I felt for Candy's coarse retelling of Martine's erotic rendezvous. Fanciful, flowery French, when translated into our upfront,

slang-filled English that's all, like, totally *whatever*, is like a Folies Bergère showgirl affecting the Girl Next Door: she's bound to lose some sequins along the way.

Nonetheless, my sister pressed on with her interpretation of Martine's developing tale of seduction for the benefit of Meg who, meanwhile, involved herself in the story like she wished Claude were her own and she could give *him* the, like, totally, whatever. She seemed, in a word, interested.

"So," Martine continued in a swoony tone, "Claude kisses me with kisses that rain the wonder of rapture on my heart..."

"So he's kissing her," came the translation, "and it's a wonder the rain doesn't rupture her heart."

"*It's raining?*" interrupted Meg, who spoke no French. She looked confused. But Martine continued.

"He kisses me and sweeps me off my feet in a dance of desire that pirouettes to the boudoir..."

"There's even *more* kissing," said Candy, "and then they head to the bedroom, where his desire is to dance a pirouette."

"*A pirouette?*" exclaimed Meg, who spoke no French. By now she was both confused *and* let down by Claude's apparent hint of kinkiness. She wore the pout to prove it.

Martine went on: "He places me like a queen on the throne of love and with great reverence he worships my body. In his words of longing, in his fevered touch, I become mistress of the realm where passion enslaves me; *I am* the goddess of enchantments!"

And they set my soul soaring on wings of *l'amour*. Oh, Claude is so wonderfully bad. He is so wonderfully bad I could die!”

“So,” interpreted my sister in her best effort to get the story straight. “He’s got her on the bed, and he’s got this fantasy going where she’s a slave goddess – or something – but something about something long, his *fever*, I guess, makes her feel like a floozy instead. And maybe she was enchanted once but now? Forget it. Her soul wants to fly *elsewhere* for love because Claude is just so terrible at it that really, she’d rather die.”

Here, Meg shifted uncomfortably in her petite loveseat. Yeah, her expression said, here it is: another tacky tale of romance gone bad, of love gone to smash. I empathize by recalling my own bungled attempt to get a concept of Happily Ever After. Sure. With that man whose whispered sweet nothings often meant just that, nothing? I wondered if the French girl’s seduction would end up like so many of my own. Would Martine, too, end up feeling like a loser in life’s romance roulette, fated forever to be spun around and around by love until dizzy with disappointment? I hoped not.

Turning back to the unfolding drama both I and Meg were eager for the English explanation of the French girl’s tale, the continuation of which was now delivered in a bored, matter-of-fact tone she accessorized by lighting a *Gauloise*.

“*Alors*,” Martine recommenced, exhaling a heart of smoke. “The music of Claude’s caress is becoming the sonata of my heart as he conducts my body like a maestro. And I have to confess,” her voice got husky to confess, “my own body is now an allegro to our love.”

Candy, who looked like she sure could use a French dictionary, winged it: “Now Claude is doing something musical to her body – or maybe there’s music? – and she...she...well, she is having an allegro!”

“*An allegro?*” said Meg, astonished – and looking more confused than ever.

“But then,” dramatized Martine, “just at the moment his animal passion – strong and fierce like the boar, you know? – just at the moment his animal passion became most profound, I begged Claude, ‘*Arrêt!*’”

“Stop!” erupted the interpreter, obviously startled by the unexpected plot twist of this narration. “Do you believe it? Claude is being such an incredible *bore* that Marie has to insist he stop!” Here Meg’s face sagged into an expression as let down as I felt the day I got the heave-ho from my ex while I, meanwhile, was as excited as if my *own* allegro were imminent. *That’s it!* I suddenly saw.

Why, simply take what in America is called a copped feel, hop the Atlantic to France and fashion it a “caress,” and *voilà*. Love becomes lovelier the second it’s hot off your lips. Yes, love-talk in the States can be as seductive as a slap with its raw, X-rated descriptions. *Let’s-have-sex!* it also will blurt, bare and blunt. *Do you want to...you know?* it will ask, bashful – leaving all poetic finesse out of the bedroom. But here in France? Describe even a friendly peck as an “embrace,” casual sex as making love, and love as the moon and stars, and it’s no secret why falling head over heels is so easy and right in the City of Light. People here wouldn’t know a seduction that sounds unromantic if they took one home to bed with them.

I look at Meg, pale with dejection after hearing the English version of Martine's bedroom escapade. Even her highlights seem dimmed. Frankly, she confided to Candy while the French girl suspended her tale to toy with the last bite of her Tarte Tatin, she could see no more tenderness and promise in this seemingly disastrous date than a USA lay can fancy itself a French "gift of pleasure." Still, she was curious about Claude and the damper put on the moves he made on Martine.

"So, after all, you guys didn't actually do it, huh?" she wanted to know and Candy, translating the question into French, turned to Martine and said: "In your evening repast of erotic promise, you and your scrumptious éclair of pleasure never did partake in the sweets of passion, nor indulge in the intoxicating nectar of ecstasy, *non?*"

"*Alors, non,*" the *coiffeuse* sighed. "The delectable dalliance will have to wait until my Claude proves how very good and sensible he is, and will favor me with love's proper *préservatif*."

"No," Candy turned back to Meg. "No condom. Big problem."

INTERNAL AFFAIRS

“Madame.” The receptionist beckons. Gingerly, my alarming symptom and I sit where she motions, here in the foyer of a Paris gynecologist’s office. The chairs are Louis something and gold frou-frou gilds the walls in that fancy French style so swell in a château, but frankly not the sort of comfort I need now that the doctor refuses to see me. Not until I fill out the fat clipboard of forms on my lap, that is, and bypass the problem that has me stalled and gnawing my pencil at Question 2: “What brings you to the doctor today?” Through the smoked glass door to the examination room I see the shadow of him hiding in back; he is perched on a stool, twiddling his instruments, waiting. His concern hangs on him like his white coat two sizes too big – just about the size mine should be for I have recently discovered a secret so hush-hush here in France that any American worth her women’s rights would marvel at her good fortune: Here, there is no “down there.”

That’s right. For millions of Frenchwomen, when it comes to the subject of their bodies, here, there are no ovaries to speak of, no fallopian tubes to point out, no uterus to note or vagina. Nor are there breasts or PMS. If that sounds bad, what’s worse is the alarming symptom I woke up with today is located in a place on my body that in France is not on the map, for no words exist to describe it.

My French friend, Eve-Marie, first shared the shocking fact of her country’s lack of even a single serviceable cervix the June day we strolled the Champs Elysees, shopping.

“I must visit the pharmacist for my little business affair,” she said suddenly, stopping in to purchase some tampons. Although Eve-Marie spoke French, the English translation that sprung into my head was as literal as I could get. “I’ll get some Pamprin, too,” she added, “for my difficulty of the stomach.”

“You mean, menstrual cramps, *non*?” I asked. My friend stared at me with an expression as vacant as those of the stone statues in the Louvre.

“*Comment?*” she said, listlessly, and I translated, “Hunh?”

Once at the drugstore, Eve-Marie was more forthright. “I would like something, *s’il vous plaît*, for my abdomen itch.” She commanded the pharmacist who, without so much as a mouth twitch of confusion, slapped onto the counter a box of Monistat 7.

“*Voilà.*”

Eve-Marie! I thought, flabbergasted. Abdomen itch? Why, the way she, a grown woman, verbally tip-toed around her bodily topics seemed a show of immaturity no better than if she’d confessed to her gynecologist some trouble with her “tee-tee,” or suggested to her husband that he be more attentive to her “fou-fou” in bed. Embarrassing.

I confronted her later over coffee. “Eve-Marie,” I said, being firm, “surely the pharmacists of France, professionals whose life work is to dispense products for every possible intimate situation, surely they won’t be shocked at, say, the mention of a yeast infection?”

“You mean abdomen itch,” my friend corrected.

“I mean, when it comes to problems like your menstrual cramps...”

“*Excusez-moi*, but it’s difficulty of the stomach,” my friend clarified.”

“...you could just explain in plain French the exact spot in our pelvic region where...”

“If it’s my lingering belly thing we’re talking about, then don’t be absurd,” said Eve-Marie, by now in a bit of a snit. “The pharmacist knows enough to hand over the K-Y jelly.”

Our chat left me shattered. Long ago liberated enough to call a woman’s givens by their proper names, I, like many Americans, can publicly mouth without stutter the word “menstruation.” I can say it, yes, “breasts” and not collapse into a heap of preteenish snickers. Yet here in France, where women’s rights ostensibly are so far advanced that RU-486 has been in use for years and sunbathing topless is de rigueur, Even-Marie can’t bring herself to actually say “premenstrual syndrome.”

“Of course, you are referring to that which arrives each month like a hair in the soup,” she said when I mentioned it. Of course.

So I zap the television one day desperate to comprehend Eve-Marie’s coyness and there they are: commercials for “throat supporters,” which in fact are brassieres; ads for a product that provides relief from the pain and bloating of your “business affair” (Pamprin); soap opera girlfriends deep in tortured conversation over the grief of a sister’s “accident” (miscarriage), in tears over a mother’s terminal “heart trouble” (breast cancer). I flip through Larousse’s French-English dictionary frantic for an answer and there they aren’t: “clitoris,” “labia,” “G-spot,” “vagina.” These and other words for women’s sexual and reproductive accoutrements simply can’t be found. Stripped. They have been

stripped from the French vocabulary as smoothly as unwanted body hair after a hot wax job.

It occurs to me that the language itself might be the douche that cleanses French of all natural, healthy expression for the nature of womanhood. After all, as one of the world's most beautiful romance languages, it gives itself the kiss of politesse by practicing excellent linguistic hygiene with many things coarse in life. It pretties-up the crude, it adds glamour to the average. In France, for example, criminals are not arrested; rather, they are "invited" to jail. A "nice to meet you" upon being introduced in French becomes "Enchanted!" Even a backyard tool shed behind a house in Provence is known as a château.

Obviously, in this county a woman's parts are perfumed by expressions that leave the feminine sex to parade through life, as does Catherine Deneuve through those French films noir – as an illusion of beauty, mystery, a creature of effortless perfection. The problem is, these parts are often drenched in euphemisms so strong their very existence seems to cease and, as the pain of my alarming symptom makes plain, I have a problem that must be described and 'belly itch' isn't it.

"Madame." The receptionist beckons again, anxious to retrieve her clipboard of forms. This time she slits her eyes at me for causing a scheduling logjam and keeping the doctor stool-sitting longer than he likes. "*Alors, fini?*"

Question 2 looms. Suddenly, I am seized with the peculiar perversity of traveler an ocean from home, alone, and frankly appalled to her very pituitary by the pitiful recognition given to Frenchwomen's otherwise self-respecting sex characteristics. If

Eve-Marie and her millions of French sisters can't, I decide, I will. I will give voice to the oppressed, to the neglected. No more disenfranchised vaginas! Yes, the revolution for a freely recognized PMS starts right here, right now, with me.

What am I doing in the doctor's office today?" I write furiously, in capital letters to express the militancy of my ideals: "I awoke with a bad menstrual pain in my left ovary or maybe my fallopian tube, or else my uterus, I don't know. But one thing's for sure: the pain isn't anything that possibly be mistaken for a soup hair."

There. I hand the receptionist my clipboard. "Well," she sniffs. "Bravo." She briskly disappears only to reappear trailing the doctor. Worry weights his hanging head.

"Madame, I don't understand," she says, oozing concern. "What can we do for you today?"

Suddenly, my body cries out in pain and panic. Cramp! Suddenly, my cause doesn't seem so hot a priority. I mean, which if I, self-style figurehead for millions of silent uteri, am picked-off prematurely by a fatal faction of pelvic inflammatory disease? What if my plans for a family are assassinated here in France by an emergency hysterectomy performed right here, right now? Dear God. My courage spontaneously aborts and I blurt in one breath: "It was right after my last little business affair when I suffered an abdomen itch followed by bad stomach difficulty. I'm scared it might be sexually transmitted heart trouble I got from my boyfriend."

"Why didn't you just say so!" The doctor rejoices, relieved. "We'll conduct an exam *tout de suite* and have you fixed up in no time. Right this way, Madame. *Merci.*"

And you know, he did. It was only a minor belly thing, after all, caused by my too tight, push-up throat supporter.

GOOD COCO

“It’s not a JOKE,” snaps Jacqueline in the pouty, wounded tone only she, at 17, can perfect. It’s cocktail hour in the *salon* of our Paris apartment, and my niece is sloshing greenish fluorescent fizz from her Miss O diet soda onto the sofa’s fresh, white slipcover. Her mother, Camille, scarfs pretzels hand over fist, and stares at the news on TV.

“Jack-leen, dear. Please.” Mom uses the French pronunciation of her granddaughter’s name because, after all, this is Paris, and a Jack-leen irritating everyone with her moods and ill manners is more lovable than a plain, bad Jacqueline without the French flourish. “Please try not to overfill your glass. The spills are impossible to get out.”

“GET IT?” Jacqueline spits out her response to my comment of a moment ago about the American University in Paris, where she is enrolled for her first year of college. Like Audrey Hepburn’s *Sabrina*, the family hope is “Jack-leen” will be transformed by the City of Light into a creature that, at minimum, knows not to flood her glass in way that makes her grandmother almost sorry she let her and her crumb-dropping mother stay in the apartment until a student-living situation is secured.

I, Auntie Coco, get it. All I said by way of friendly, pre-dinner chit-chat was, gee, the academic schedule of the American University doesn’t sound too grueling, what with Jacqueline’s one or two classes per day, Wednesdays free and Fridays off. And, now, my niece is so incensed she speaks in the capital letters of teenage outrage and her mother

lobs me a look that says, *sorry, dear Sister, I'll defend to any death my daughter*. She snarls a bit for emphasis. *Better not say not another word*.

Be the dog, I prompt myself. *Be the dog*. To avoid a family scene, sit and do not speak. Would the dog blurt out now, "Excuse me, Princess Jack-leen! Unspeakable thousands of dollars in school loans sure to put your parents in a coma and you, with this attitude?" No. Would the dog declare the enterprise completely asinine – Camille finding her daughter grown-up enough to live alone in Paris when already, in six swift days, Jacqueline has rejected the school dorm ("too gross"), pooh-poohed the other students ("rich spoiled bratty children"), had nothing to do with the French family that offered a lovely room in their Seine-view apartment if she would tutor their children in English ("What? No way!"), and pronounced her art history teacher "stupid." Better to drool and scratch and lick one's intimate bits in company than voice this Auntie's thought that it's all preposterous. Her parents' grand plan – championed by Jacqueline herself – that a girl still damp from high school will "find herself" in the City of Light might sound super if my niece were a cheery girl of bold, brave adventure. From what I can see, the temperamental teen given to fits when the café waiter fails, in his European way, to deliver her soda sans ice, and who broods when the Kardashians do not appear on Parisian TV, is finding the city...well, to be kind: not to her liking. So far.

"THE PEOPLE IN PARIS ARE SO OBNOXIOUS," she says. "THE BOY IN MY FRENCH CLASS? HE KISSES THE TEACHER'S ASS. I HATE KIDS WHO KISS THE TEACHER'S ASS." My sister, who understands Jacqueline's, um, *charm*, during cocktail hour is a coping cover-up for raving teenage terror, stares at the news.

Mobs of Islamic jihadists burn the French and American flags. Afraid to be away from home, afraid to be without her mother, afraid to make her way among other first-year college students in a new and very foreign city, Jacqueline by all accounts is melting down.

Happy, hopeful suggestions fill my mind.

Happy, hopeful suggestions are not a good idea.

“You know, Jack-leen, when your mom and Auntie Coco went off to college, it was hard for them, too. At first.” Mom with forced cheer risks igniting a fireball of what, I don’t want to know. Tears? Tantrums? Teenage angst made chilling to behold? Camille and Jacqueline both turn on her dark expression that smolder, *who cares?* And the combustible mood in the room makes it clear: My sister, mama grizzly, in defense of her cub will make quick *déjeuner* of me if I so much as squeak.

Be the dog, I tell myself. *Be the dog*. The most mute of mutts wouldn’t – couldn’t – blab now that it doesn’t *matter* whose plan it is to see a year in Paris make Jacqueline a true Jack-leen – a *soignée* young sophisticate schooled in both paintings of the Louvre and French fashion, culture and food. The girl guzzling whatever Miss O she doesn’t spill doesn’t seem to be, as Auntie would be mistaken to observe aloud, much enjoying the opportunity.

“Oh, yes, it was. Hard.” I fake-smile and Camille says nothing. She turns back to TV, and Jacqueline resumes her poking at her phone. I feel the weight of the Eiffel Tower and Arc de Triomphe *combined* lift off me. Crisis averted. Like the dog so good it get rewarded with something it really, really wants, I practically pant with glee. I have

discovered the secret to surviving my time in Paris in the company of my sister and niece. Let Camille age decades trying to find an affordable living situation Jacqueline likes, whether rooftop *chambre de bonne*, room with a family or cheap apartment share. Let Jack-leen-to-be pooh-pooh Paris all she likes. That is, until her fear subsides, her confidence blossoms, and she finds her inner Sabrina – her *pleasant* inner Sabrina. This would be a Sabrina who does not unnerve her Auntie with barks and snarls said Auntie has no clue how to handle, having never been mom to a teen. Until then? I’ll be the dog. I’ll sit in happy silence beside my sister and niece in the sidewalk cafés of Montmartre; I’ll run with them in the Bois de Boulogne. I’ll follow along as they check-out apartments and ride the metro to and fro. Yes, I’ll be a companion content no matter what. Rules to remember. Keep my yap closed! Be sure to nap! Especially during those sudden mother-daughter squalls that blow in at least once a day. Acquiring a new, student life in Paris seems fraught with stress for these two. To make our time together fun and productive, I best wag my imaginary tail in happy hope the teen tempers, teen tantrums – teen drama – I’ve seen so far will stop. At least then I won’t add to the trauma any Auntie observations no actual pup would be dumb enough to utter.

“Hey Auntie Coco.” Jacqueline speaks in a smaller, fonder font. Already she is responding to the newly cuddly canine me. Now, I am the doggy-wanting-to-please who does *not* point out the “so, like, lame” painting by “Season” she saw in the Musée d’Orsay was actually a Cézanne; I’m the cute mute mutt who mouths not a word of concern to Camille that unspeakable thousands toward a year of meltdowns might warrant thinking about. “Want to go for a run in the Bois tomorrow?”

Rrrrrf!

* * *

I'm the dog! Call me Coco, Fifi, Louis or Beau. It won't matter, just call me. For there is nothing more wonderful, I am discovering, than being a pup in Paris. Like now. Here I am in a trot behind she who drops pretzels on the floor – my luck – and she whose bark is often more fierce than mine. We're in the Bois de Boulogne, the largest park of Paris. Here, 2,090 acres of dog-run allow me off-leash to frolic in large grassy fields, along wooded winding paths or together with my people as they run or bike or hike. While I am welcome nearly everywhere in Paris – from the boulangerie to the brasserie to chic boutiques and bars – many city parks post signs: *Pas de chien, même tenu en laisse*. No dogs allowed, it means. Even on a leash. It's supposed to be a serious 475-euro fine if I do my business in, say, the Tuileries outside the Louvre, or on the Champs de Mars greens beneath the Eiffel Tower. But the bike-mounted police who write tickets seem to be in on what's not so secret. Laws? Ha! Rules may or may not be, the Parisian dog owner believes, but they do not pertain to *moi*. Most police agree and are not fond of enforcing fines. So it's a dog's day of utter delight as I run free in the Bois, and the three of us make our way around the larger of two beautiful lakes. The sun is smiling, the swans are swimming, the geese are honking, and Arf! I bark to myself. ArfArfArf! We round a bend, jog past a passel of picnicking families, and, what do you know, here's the gang! All here.

Count them...1, 2...23. Today a group of “students” enrolled in Education Canine, a Paris doggie daycare and obedience school that turns even *chiens méchants*,

into exceptionally polite members of French society, are off-leash and sitting at the feet of their trainer; he's a guy as shaggy as the sheepdog up front who wears a handsome expression of rapt attention. I wonder if she who invited me running will say of the sheepdog, See how obnoxious? See how he's kissing the teacher's.... Just then the dog, surely on the honor roll, kisses the trainer's *knee* with a loving lick and I am left incredulous. How can it be? Twenty-three dogs off-leash lined-up like soldiers who obey the slightest command. If I were real, would I? I watch in awe as the trainer pips his little whistle, *pip-pip*, and the Labrador retriever, dismissed, leap into the lake with joy. *Pip-pip*, he pips again and both poodle and pug in roll on the lawn in utter puppy *joie*. I would! Dogs here in the Bois get to swim, fetch, chase and play for hours during the day – all while learning the model behavior that makes them welcome in Paris restaurants and shops.

Bulldog, dachshund, malamute, mutt – a *woof* to you and the bloodhound, too! I silently greet the gang as we pass, running, still running. She who often gets a leg cramp while jogging suddenly stops. “Blahblahblahblah,” she says to the other, she whose face turns red beneath her sweat and yelps, “TALKTALKTALK!!!” She makes a mouth like she might cry. I wait at a respectful distance. I wait and watch the swans. How pleasant it is to feel the sun on my nose, hear the geese go *honk-honk*, and know there's much more lake path to run. I love being the dog!! Let's say right now I weren't. Camille clearly is having mom-words with her daughter and Jacqueline is snuffling back tears. This means, I'd have to be Auntie-concerned and Auntie-worried. I'd require powers of Auntie-empathy – huge powers – to turn our run back to fun. All that *there-there*

required of me. All those *now-nows* needed. Having to twist my tongue in search of the words that will help broker peace or mediate healing.... All in all, it's a task that's pretty Auntie-thankless. But being the dog? I'm loving it! Whatever the trouble bubbling between she now muttering “&%\$#!” and she who shakes her head in something like “sorry,” I need not get involved. Instead, I am free to enjoy a nice pee – the *toilettes* are just ahead – or gawk at the obedience-school dogs who are now, in yet another happy puppy pursuit, invited to join the trainer for coffee in the outdoor café beside the lake.

Why not wander off to join them? Ah, here we are. I settle-in at a bitty bistro table while nearby the obedient 23 stand, sit, sprawl, scratch, sniff and yawn in perfect canine contentment. A trough of water offers them drink. The dogs have arrayed themselves on the ground around the trainer, who is seated at the table adjacent to mine. He sips *café au lait* and sings. Softly, softly, and mostly to himself, he trills a French *chanson* that lulls some of the pups to sleep. At the refrain the Australian shepherd lets his eyelids fall – the last to give in to a nap. It's a signal to me that, if during obedience class he can indulge himself with a morning snooze, I can, too. I close my eyes and revel in the breeze cooling my brown, the birdsong tickling my ears, the scent of rich French espresso...

“Blahblahblah?” She who looks suspiciously fresh suddenly stands above me with a what-are-you-doing tone and a face washed clean of tears. Her mother waits by the lake and motions, *come on!* She looks impatient. I guess it's time to get going. I pick-up my trot and follow the two again running who, I marvel, are newly calm and surprisingly smiley.

I missed the row; I skipped the ick. Up ahead they actually laugh, the duo that drives Auntie to distraction with moments – and moods – too confounding to manage. They playfully challenge a race. First one to the boulangerie for brioche gets two. I speed up to join, if not pass them. Brioche! They welcome me with a hearty “hi!” She who seems very glad that, at the first whiff of tension, tantrum or tears, I scampered off for coffee with the dogs to let the squall with her mom resolve itself, says as much.

“Go Auntie Coco!” she says in a sweet-teen tone – so sweet I know it can only mean: *good girl*.

* * *

I’m the dog! It’s moving day and I’m riding a creaky, cranky old lift up six flights of spiral stairs to the rooftop apartment of a *Parisienne* with a studio to rent. She who has five humongous suitcases stuffed with sweaters, shoes, shirts, shampoo, a shaver and similar feminine etcetera for a year away at school rides with me and whines “waaaaaaaah.” Meanwhile, she who lifted, carried and battled the four humongous bags – too big to fit in the one-person lift – blurts out a word I’m sure is bad. I’m sure because she who, with reluctance, has agreed to live in this rental blurts the same word the moment we enter the studio and see at once the slippers, worn-out and ratty, left beside the bed. Looking more closely, we also see in the kitchen’s tiny fridge a black, half-eaten banana.

“Yuk!” is how the blurt sounds.

It is so, so good to be the dog. To be Auntie now would be bad. I’d be pressed by familial affection to make it all better. A hair in the sink, two in the tub – there’s even a

tissue used and left on the built-in desk. This is a studio haunted by the former tenant's droppings; it will take some scrubbing and lots of love before it feels like home.

“Oh. My. GOD,” whines she who has waaaaaay too many skin cleansers, hair rinses, tooth whiteners, pimple preventers, curl-enhancers, self-tanners, lotions, potions, scrubs, soaks, foams and perfumes ever to find space in the miniscule bathroom cabinet.

“Theretheretherethere,” clucks she who, like a mother hen, pecks at this and pokes at that in an effort to put the contents of five humongous bags into place (for now) and soothe the huge upset in the room when less than half will fit.

These two could use an aunt, of course. A cooing, cooling presence. A level head that can offer that, perhaps, the pimple preventer can live just as well in the kitchen cupboard. What's more, the black banana, the tissue, used, and the pile of porn we next find beside the bed...well, all of it can go to trash and the place promptly disinfected. Surely they have haz-mat teams in France! But an aunt like that? Who is an aunt like that? Auntie Coco...no. I, too, am appalled by the tub hairs and towels the color of crud. I have no wise words to encourage my niece and support my sister in this moment that might, absent such intervention, devolve into disaster.

Things will get better, you'll see.

We'll make it okay, just wait.

It's better being the dog. As the dog my only job is to offer big, sad eyes when, under the bed, a pair of panties tipped with dust is discovered.

“YUK!!!” There it is again, the bad-word blurt.

I make my big, sad eyes bigger, sadder. She who picks up the panties with the crud-colored towel and tosses them into the trash with the tissue, the tub-hairs and the porn, takes the hand of she who is stricken with a look Sabrina surely never expressed, and walks her to the bedroom. I pad along behind, keeping quiet.

“Murmurmurmurmurmur,” she says, her tone gentle. She flings open the window and oh! The sight unfurls before us – a splendor of rooftops, the Valhalla of views, and the sky beyond a rosy-hued stunner of pure Parisian beauty.

“Ooooh!” ahhs the girl for whom this room six flights high in the City of Light *will* be made better, she’ll see. She gasps and giggles and bounces a bit in teenage glee. I the dog declare: I swear, the payoff is huge – *huge* – when Auntie makes no effort to impose her insistence that really, bedside lamps with burned-out bulbs? A stove that smokes? A closet cluttered with a forgotten fez and someone’s funky bolero? All will be okay, just wait. In becoming Jack-leen, Jacqueline will find for herself that anything creepy, rank or displeasing she might encounter in her new home need only be tossed, cleaned or forgotten. And even Sabrina, even *she* had feelings of fear, an ache for home, and an impossibly magical year ahead that would teach her everything she needed to come into her own.

“Ohmygod, it’s, like, *so beautiful*. I love Paris!” Jacqueline – for now – glows with excitement. Her happiness – of this moment – lights the dingy room and my sister’s eyes both.

“Arf!” I arf to myself. I like this trick. I am *so* ready for my treat.

ONLY IN PARIS IS PARTING SUCH SWEET SORROW

The situation is completely hopeless. I can't go on. I have been in Paris a month. On a diet. It's my effort to maintain an L.A. body. That's what you have when you subsist for years on skimpy fat-free fare in a fear-of-fat town that's totally free of fat people. Or so it seems when you live there.

But here in Paris? Fat is happening! I mean, butter is a French diet staple. Full-fat Camembert is a course unto itself. And cream? Cream is so revered it anoints everything from your breakfast brioche to your bedtime cocoa. Take *steak-frites*, the classic sidewalk café special that in numbers served daily would bury the burger-billions McDonalds boasts. Enriched by a blob of melting butter, complemented by a rich Bordeaux and finished off with a handsome hunk of Brie – why, here you have all the nutrition to help build beautiful bodies in one way only: out.

So this L.A. body has been trying to keep control. You know, nix the frites, and when things get bad, binge on a carrot curl. That is why the future looks so bleak. Life in Paris is not worth living. At least not in an L.A. body. I know this woe because why? Because I am doomed by that other French dalliance with fat, this one graced with the gift of added sugar: the pastries.

Yes, the pastries. You see, in a go-fat! town like Paris, pastries are to Parisians what a juice cleanse is to L.A. bodies beautiful: everything. Pastries line the windows of every bakery that's on every corner of every grand boulevard. Pastries fruity are expected at lunch; pastries gooey, at tea. Heaped with cream and choked with chocolate,

sauced in sugar and bred with butter, pastries rich and pastries sinful sidle over on a cart at intimate bistro dinners; they snuggle up to your senses in a seduction of *crème Anglaise* or flirtatious swirls of meringue. And all the while they purr, *I'm yours. Take me.*

Of course I will. And why not? Pastries are Paris's pride. Their presentation is considered high art, and for taste alone they are low on the food chain of what Parisians will sacrifice on a diet. Creating a perfect cake or tart is a coveted crown of culinary achievement in a hostess; a single *éclair* can make or break a professional baker's reputation. And so when the impossibly bird-boned, tan-'n-toned, chic *Parisienne* (and you know she's everywhere) dives in any hour day or night without a cellulite-dread in the world, woe is the American woman deprived of a French cream puff – she might serial kill for one.

Like me.

In fact, I am so woe-wracked in this body-by-sprouts while everyone *else* in Paris enjoys a hazelnut buttercream high, that I see the end of my rope. It's right here, right now. I want out.

Okay, this requires careful preparation. We want no botched jobs. Better quick, clean, painless. But first, I must well prepare well to ensure my plan works.

Here, the problem gets sticky. And creamy and gooey – oh, deadly delirium in nuts! For in Paris, choosing the perfect pastry for your purpose has all the import of properly checking your weapon for a duel.

Should it be the *tarte aux pommes*, its pert apple slivers sweet, or the *meringue au chocolat*, its cloud of egg whites divine? Should it be a *gâteau framboise*, cake layered with wild berries from the woods, or flaky *mille feuille*, its thousand pastry leaves given shape by buttercream?

Yes, that will be fine, I'll take one of each," I tell the counter clerk of the first patisserie I choose to help me do the deed.

"For a party, Madame?"

"*Oui, Madame, s'il vous plait.*" I hope she can't see through my lie to the fact my party will be for one.

She boxes the batch and flourishes the package of deadly goods with a pink and perky bow.

"*Merci,*" I say, sure she suspects nothing of my plan. She slings me a look like she might recognize the wild cherry glaze in my eyes – the mark of death on the sugar obsessed. But I am out the door before she can ask if, perhaps, I would like to talk.

I am full of purpose, a woman hurtling toward her destiny. I march my pink bow ten feet down the street and lo! What shall it be from this patisserie? The *éclair au caramel*, a dream divine made real at first bite? Or, possibly the *gâteau amandine*, its splendid almond flecks the cake's caress of crunch? Then there is that glory named for the patron saint of pastry-makers, the historically important custard number known as *Gâteau St. Honoré*.

"Sure," I say to the clerk when she asks. Pink-bow a big batch of those, too, *merci*.

Now I've got the goods, er, the goodies. Slowly, deliberately, I calculate all possible consequence of my act and choose the time: within the hour. The place: mine. Alone, I must be alone, for I want not to be talked out of this. I arrive home with my boxes of pretty toxins and decide that, to do the job properly, it's only kind to leave a note. "Goodbye cruel world of Diet Coke," I post on the fridge. "Thin thighs in 30 days, phooey!"

Time's flying fast now; I must hurry before I lose nerve. Furiously, I fumble with the fuss of pink bows. Box lids lifting, sugar-scent wafting...hurry, hurry and now, there is no turning back. Cardboard edges unfold, paper doilies unfurl, the whipped cream waits in high piles of – wait! This is wrong, all wrong. What about afterward? I stop unfolding, momentarily, to flash on a future scene. Will anyone know what to do? After all, I remember my mother's horror at the idea of ending up unattractively splat in the path of a killer bus – and wearing the wrong underwear. With compassion for my family, I change into my best – and tiniest – French lace things to enjoy them one last time. I leave helpful instructions on what to do with the body:

- Leave it be upon the sofa
- Puff some pillows to prop it before the TV
- Let it repose there in peace – *finally* free of its daily duty of exercise.
- Put a bouquet of posies in its hands in the form of the remote control – a nice touch

That settled, I glance at the clock. Oh, God: 6:45 p.m. I have only minutes before they're home.

Mouth don't fail me now, I pray, bucking up the courage I need to load the pastries onto a plate, release the safety latch on the dishwasher where my weapon awaits and make sure the implement is clean.

Then, in a sudden rush of oblivion, my final act and I are one. No thought for the morrow, no ache of regret. One pastry, two pastries, three pastries, 10. Down they go, buttercream soothing and almond paste oozing from the layers of puff pastry sweet. Gulp goes a *Gâteau St. Honoré*, down the hatch, an *éclair* of custard cool. With powdered sugar flying and meringue crumbs dropping, I'm deadened to the world of disciplined donkey kicks, sit-ups and lunges. I'm delivered from a life of diets.

The exit is swift. The deed, complete. Gone, all gone, both pastries and I.

The boxes lie pillaged. Here, collapsed upon the sofa pillows, my blood sugar soars up, up to the great bakery beyond. I am soaked in well being, and now understand how a Christmas fruitcake feels. Swoony with sweetness and happy – deliriously happy – with fat. Yes, this truly must be it: Heaven.

When they find the body – slumped snoozing and drooling on the white slipcover– it is with less shock than sadness that they shake their heads. “Poor, poor deprived thing,” they say. “In Paris all this time without so much as one tiny taste of pastry. No wonder she had to bite the big *éclair*.”

Three days later my L.A. body was buried – behind the beginning bulges of the larger me I eventually would be at the end of my yearlong Paris sojourn. Travel is said to be broadening. I now have the broader abroad body to prove it. And it was worth every single, sumptuous fat gram.

WHAT DO YOU SAY AFTER YOU SAY ALLÔ?

The guillotine. Now *there's* a noteworthy symbol of torture in France's colorful story. Why, in the realm of Things to Dread it's right up there with another invention of fright that today is found right here, right now, on my desk. Ringing. And for whom does this bell toll? It tolls for me! Now my woe is complete. Though it's a far, far better thing I do now than I have ever done since coming to live in Paris – it would be a far, far better rest just to ignore it – I know my time has drawn nigh. I must go forth bravely and face it: the French telephone.

The telephone! The reign of terror wrought by this innocuous apparatus of plastic is upon me with a punishment most cruel and unusual. *Ring-ring* the phone sounds in a haunting buzz that chills my blood. *Ring-ring*. Buzz though it does in that European way so unlike the American phones I know, with their familiar shrill *bringgg*, happy bass *beep*, or cell-phone song of choice, I make no move to pick it up. I am frozen by mortal dread of the unwelcome fate that awaits my turn to confront the receiver. *Why oh why?* I cry in wretched regret. *Why did I never learn to speak French better?*

I will say to my confessor, yes: I daydreamed through seven years of French lessons in school; I snoozed through months of Berlitz refreshers, the fool. And now, after living nearly a year in this city on the Seine and *still* not getting it, my guilt is pronounced. I am a condemned woman now. *Ring-ring*, the phone buzzes and my heart jump-jumps. *Ring-ring*. Alas, it is so, so tragic. It was a dream come true to quit California and come to Paris for a year or two to live like a true *Parisienne*. Yet who

knew that all too soon I would be up against the brutal consequence of my crimes of many years past against a language I thought I could speak, but...no.

Ring-ring...oh woe, there it tolls...ring, ring.

My knees shake, my heart quakes: I am sentenced to answer the phone.

Oh, I suppose this sorry day was my fate even months ago when I landed in France and discovered to my shock that everyone here speaks French. Fast French. Flawless French. French so fluent it's oppression! Yet I, a traveler who smartly packed the requisite French-English dictionary, went ahead and spoke to the people of Paris. My French accent so bad, my French grammar so sad, reflected not the charm that French as a romance language demanded. Yet how could I know? Yes, I, who enjoyed life in a sidewalk café but failed to roll the French "r" in the back of my throat when saying to the waiter, *merci*. How could I know I'd be a blight on French pride that day I bought two butter croissants at the corner boulangerie, but with so many pronunciation faux pas that Madame, not understanding, gave me only one. What a shame, she shook her head and shrugged. No boulangerie in all of France stocks and sells what I seek, she said, so shooed me off to see the grocer. Perhaps *he* carries pairs of butter. She was trying to be helpful. *Ring-ring*, the phone buzzes, and my heart thump-thumps. *Ring-ring*.

But really, that memorable occasion at the Marais fitness center. Was my folly such an insurrection that the deed needs to mortally damn me?

"Merci pour votre cours stimulé, monsieur," was all I said to a terrifically toothsome personal trainer. I was thanking him, I thought, for his invigorating fat-blasting class.

“You like?” he replied and posed. The Adonis was angled just so, the better for me to admire his chiseled build.

It wasn't until his smile lit up like the Eiffel Tower and his eyes alone peeled me of my clothes that I understood my fatal mistake. I had mispronounced *cours* like *corps* and thanked him instead for his thrilling body.

A crime, I confess. But a crime perhaps worthy of naught but a fine! Aye, I implore any tribunal that finds it just to dispatch this fool to the frightful fate of the phone, please! Or, I should say, *s'il vous plait!*

Is it not punishment enough to know the unspeakable agony of those gone to their doom before me? Just yesterday, in fact, it was my own dear sister who met her horror when *ring-ring, ring-ring* went the cursed thing during our dinner hour.

“*Allô?*” she said. When her turn came to confront the receiver, it was with courage she picked it up. Brave and bold, she did not betray the American tourist's insecurity that she had studied, practiced and perfected her French a full 15 years and still it wasn't enough. She accepted with grace an end that is fixed in my mind forever as a death too, too gruesome to describe – though I'll try.

“*Oui?*” she said next, weakly. Her voice trembled with the awful knowing that, despite her French accent superb and her French grammar spectacular, her ability to speak was perceived as inadequate. No, she would not, she *could* not be understood over the narrow wire clearly, quickly, crisply – *Frenchperson-like*. She was, quite simply, an American in Paris. And, like many Americans daunted by the breakneck pace at which

Parisians speak, not to mention their insiders' slang and jokes everyone gets only if they're French, she was simply much too out of it to be out with it.

“*V-v-voulez-vous? No, p-p-pouvez-vous?*” She squeaked and struggled for the right words to offer the receiver whose faceless executioner at the end of the line had said I knew not what. What horror followed were the pitiful few stutters I couldn't bear to overhear before her conversation – whomp! – was severed forever. Just like that, the blade of shame came down and cut her off in the prime of her conjugations. The French caller, impatient, had hung up. Wrong number.

Ring-ring, the phone summons and feeds my despair for the number now up is mine. *Ring-ring*. Delirious with apprehension, I consider the four measured steps I must take to my desk. I recoil at the sight of the scaffold of books upon which the wretched thing sits, poised to dispatch me forthwith to my doom. *Ring-ring* it buzzes and buzzes and buzzes. How it drives me mad in relentless pursuit of my agony! *Ring-ring*. I blindly take the first step. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of dread, I beg it be swift – that slice of time between my first *Allô* and my final *Au revoir*. Sneer at my fear if you will, any of you who don't share my shame. My oafish American tongue that twists on flowery French words. My twangy American accent that starts in the nose and stays there. My knowledge of French common expressions that is so foggy it drifts in and out on the wind. Of course, in day-to-day life these flubs and flaws mean nothing. The kind people of Paris will translate, or try, this traveler's tortured efforts to talk. After all, I am fluent in the goofy grins and helpless looks, the silly expressions and

grandiose gestures that are the get-by language accepted worldwide. In the best of times, in the worst of times, my peppy pantomime will carry the conversation in France.

But the telephone shows no such mercy.

In its chilling discharge of duty it decapitates the aid of friendly smiles and laughing eyes; it severs the help of the gist silly gestures give. Alone, all alone on the line, my broken, spoken French must offer itself up for judgment before a caller I tremble in dread will decree, *oh-la-la, your French is a mess! I pronounce it pathetic – in the first degree.*

Ring-ring; ring-ring; ring-ring: The nightmarish knell of the phone doth toll. I'm coming! I'm coming! to face my fate, but every ounce of my being rebels. Rage, rage against that dark night of the soul when after I answer, "*Allô?*" and say what I will, whatever I must, I will be shaken to my soul by the murderous words I'd sooner dig my own grave than hear.

"*Comment, Madame?*" the caller will say. "What's that again, *s'il vous plait?*"

Oh, what torment it is to describe the death, cruel death coming next. My tongue's writhing, my lips' squirming, my voice's most horrible contortions! The carnage of verb tenses nonsensical and nouns, mispronounced! As I attempt to repeat myself in faster French, more flawless French – French closer to that of the French themselves – my voice stutters, it staggers. Until, at last, it croaks. Caller have mercy on my soul! Though my pronouns are pathetic, and my accent a lament, damn me not by proper idioms forgotten to that inferno of Americans thought crass and unattractive. As my self-respect oozes out into a puddle of regret, I'll beg the caller grant me one last

grace. Put me out of my misery swiftly! Tarry not to let fall the receiver, and for God's sake, cut me off!

Ring-ring, the phone taunts as I approach, yet closer. *Ring-ring*. All struggle spent, I lift the receiver. Oddly. I am calm. Woe, woe, I intone to myself and aloud, breathe my last "*Allô?*" These are the telephones that try a girl's soul.

"Hi!" the caller squeals in a happy voice from home, San Francisco. It is bounced to me by satellite, so it comes with an interruption, "hi-hi!"

Can it be? I am pardoned? At the eleventh hour my sentence is commuted?

"Hi," I squeal back, stunned. Yes, miraculously, I am spared. I am sprung to speak English – sweet freedom.

For this American in Paris, it is the best of times, it is the worst of times. Life is good, though the Terror of the telephone ever threatens. But each dawn, as the sun rises on a day of dazzling promise of new places to go and fun things to do in the City of Light I love, I vow never to forget: I better hurry-up and learn to speak French better. Or, *ring-ring, ring-ring*, it's off with my head with the crazy idea I can pass for a Parisian when...no.

MAKE MINE ME

My sister showed up the other day with a new set of breasts. Bouncy breasts. Rounded breasts. Breasts that aim dead ahead with the resolve of a heat-seeking missile.

And I don't get it.

This is a woman so pathologically modest that she'd sooner be shot than be seen in her flannel, lumberjack-plaid lingerie, much less (no way!) stark naked. And yet here she is: lifting her top so all assembled – her husband, children, sisters, brothers, parents, in-laws and dog – can witness the implant surgeon's handiwork. Braless, her breasts are mottled black and blue and brazenly shout hurt and pain. My sister beams.

"I don't mind showing everyone," she says, "because they aren't me."

Her husband Michael, perhaps feeling accused by the silence in the room, puffs for confrontation. "Trust me," he says, "I had nothing to do with it."

Acquired on the sly and the shock of us all, Camille's new B-cup babies – \$3500 each – are the last thing on the planet she'd be expected to desire. A tomboy as a child, a teenage athlete, a successful stockbroker and now, a wife and mom, my sister's sleek, lean shape at its best was not the stuff of bodacious. But it wasn't uncomely either. And even through two pregnancies, countless diets, and the relentless feminine frustrations with fashion, fitness, her "flaws," never so much as one discouraging word was heard from her – ever – about her breasts. There was no obvious envy of the generously endowed, no audible lament over the little loss of oomph that comes with the passing years.

Then she went to Paris.

And now here they are: Camille's new, purchased works of breastly perfection.

So, okay, I say, recalling some startling facts I once read in *Time* magazine. In France, \$2.9 *billion* was spent last year on lingerie, more than any other country in Europe. And a full 87 percent of French people believe these bits of snips of silk and bits of lace are an important – yes, *important* – part of life. Is it one trip to the land of beauty and the bust, I ask, and you're sold on the whole French God-is-in-the-thong thing?

“Not at all,” insists my sister, saying, don't be ridiculous, bras and panties and whatnot are not a *religion* in France. “The lingerie is not *that* holy, if not. It's just really pretty and besides, it's not about the breasts.”

It's not? Well, it certainly is some bosomly vavavoom my sister now projects. And you'd think it would be eager to (forgive me) bust out around town dolled in tighter T-shirts, plungier necklines, tiny cropped tops and bikinis of itsy-bitsy demi-cup tops. Especially since Camille is so tickled by the topic of her no-sweat outpatient procedure that its grotesque and gory details – the less said, the better – are the conversation starter she won't hesitate to use. With anyone. “It's just so interesting,” she says, “because come on, it's not like they're me!”

But no. Dressed as usual in baggy blouses and camouflage sweaters and work shirts that swing unisex, Camille's new breasts could not be less interested in flaunting their fresh and oh-so-fetching femininity. Apparently, their power is more subtle; their wiles less expected. In fact, my sister's fuller, firmer new friends are about to change her life. They will take her places she hasn't been in years, introduce her to adventures she

never dared try. Once the incisions heal, the tenderness lessens, and they feel more at home on her chest, Camille's new breasts will turn her into the kind of traveler I barely dare to be. A woman free. Emboldened. Gutsier, if bustier.

For instance, my sister's magical new mammaries will inspire her to climb Alaska's Mt. McKinley, at more than 20,000 feet. They will see her off to Spain for a romantic sixteenth anniversary, plan a summer sojourn to Sweden, and save for an African photo safari. Here a trip, there a trek, everywhere an airport security check...why, my sister's intrepid breasts will see to it she henceforth renounces routine and makes her life fun.

What next? I ask, eventually. Will your newly beckoning bust beg you to take-up skydiving? Urge you to join an expedition up Everest? Will it insist you leave Michael and the children to run off with a bronzed, blond hunk of barely 21? "No, nothing like that." Camille laughs. "They just make me feel good about, you know, me.

"Even though no one will notice and no one can tell," my sister says of the bosomly facsimiles that, from a respectful distance, have that perky only-her-surgeon-knows-for-sure appearance, "I did it for me. To feel more like...me."

"But I thought they weren't you," I say.

"Right. They aren't me, but now that they're around it's like I'm finally more like, well, Camille.

I muse about this a moment and find I can't argue with how hanging out with her new pair of perky pals has made my sister not only want to see the world, but also become the best possible 36-B she can be. Yesterday, she got a new haircut, choppy and

hip; tomorrow it's off with the children to a class in beginning guitar. This is a hint the fringe-dressed hippie chick of Camille's *that's me!* childhood fantasy may finally find expression. At 43? Yes, my sister's dreams, once delayed, her desires, never tried, are riding a wave of confidence unleashed by the swells that swell her sweaters.

And I am jealous. Of her power, her pride, her self-possession. Not to mention envious of all the trips and treks and newly purchased Parisian pleasures, the lingerie that's oh-so-lusciously French. Am I jealous of her breasts?

Not a chance. My bra is remaining a 34-A, thank you. When I see Camille considering her compelling cleavage with the bored detachment of a grocery clerk arranging his display of firm and flawless nectarines, I hug my own imperfect God-givens closer to my heart, live vicariously through my sister's adventures, and say to anyone who cares to ask (although unlike Camille I will not flash), make mine me.

DAY OF THE LIVING DEAD

Trash TV talks to me. I'm seized with something sick when, out of my right mind, I flip through channels and visit with *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, or make sure I am *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

Tacky tabloids transfix me. At the supermarket checkout, I peruse the gossip, with slack jaw and awed: Will Brad and Angelina elope? Will Demi relapse and return to rehab? Will Beyoncé publicly flaunt her after-baby body? The trashy, the tacky – I love it. Afterwards, naturally, it follows: the crash from the rush of endorphins released when I ogle the lives of popular media icons. Invariably, my high over Kim Kardashian's \$10 million wedding/divorce/new baby abates, and I am left feeling hollow, unsatisfied. The *wow* I feel over Jennifer Aniston's hot-body diet, once it knocks me flat with fascination and then subsides, tsunami-style, strands me on the sands of utter unfulfillment. Like too much booze or junky food, my addiction to tabloid lives and trash-TV times is bad for me. Oh, indulgence might not leave me ripe for rehab, but still. Whatever creative impulse might move me, whatever desire to learn or self-improve, is compromised. I feel dull, dead, and dopey after a dose of people on the cover of *People*. I feel filled with a whole lot of nothing and, in the way of that which is truly unhealthy, craving more.

So, I'm standing at the wrought-iron gate of Père-Lachaise, still hungry, and thinking about Jenn's exercise regimen. Honestly, if I want a hot-bod like hers, I certainly didn't need the second *tarte aux fraises* I just scarfed at Café le Zazir in

Montmartre. These probably aren't the thoughts of a proper Père-Lachaise visitor, but come on! The celebrated cemetery of Paris is hardly great filler for the *National Enquirer*, so...so what? Gotta find my fix nonetheless. Here, a hundred lush acres sprawling around the 20th arrondissement is Paris's city of dead people. Some of its residents have "lived" here since 1804 – the year the cemetery opened. Feeling positively porky from desserts, in the plural, I'm guessing Père-Lachaise will make the perfect place for a promenade this Paris afternoon. Hushed and serene, its hilly, wooded, winding paths ought to de-thunder my thighs in a workout of which *The Biggest Loser* would approve. Plus, I understand there is a lot to see. There are tombs styled like faux Egyptian pyramids and memorials that parade as Gothic chapels. There are artful, modernist slabs of the Le Corbusier school that are don't-miss architectural curiosities. Then there are the corpses of the notorious. The 12th c. lovers Abélard and Héloïse are here, as is rock-and-roll's Jim Morrison. One can pack a picnic, as some Parisians do, and pass several lazy hours lounging and browsing beneath the shade of lacey, ancient horse-chestnut trees. At Père-Lachaise, owls nest in crumbling family tombs, feral cats dash about at dusk, and each grave marker evokes a life come and gone but to see these moldy monuments tell it, definitely not forgotten. This cemetery is the most popular, the most visited in Europe. That means, well, Brad and Angie could be here! *La Famille Pitt-Jolie* owns a château in the south of France, the tabloids tell me, and even the kids – all six – are fond of Paris jaunts. I need no further convincing. Yes, yes – absolutely. Here I will pass the afternoon. Any Real Housewife worth her spray tan would, would she not?

In the late 1780s, the walls of Paris's Cemetery of the Innocents collapsed and seven hundred years' worth of bones and rotting corpses spewed forth. Not good. Père-Lachaise was conceived, then, as a hygienic improvement upon the practice, common well into the 1700s, of throwing all but churchmen, nobles and the very rich into common graves. With such a dark past the place might be eerie, but no. Père-Lachaise is hauntingly beautiful. Some 300,000 graves are attended by picturesque parklands that, in the midst of hurly-burly Paris, serve as "a haven longed for by aching souls," in the words of 19th c. French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans. Flowers by the thousands grow in lovely tableaux of color here, and a resplendence of trees seems animated by mischievous spirits. All around me they sweep and sway in the breeze; among the dead how vital, how *alive* they appear. I purchase a *plan* from the monsieur selling maps and figure Kim, Khloe and Kourtney Kardashian would find this *SO, like, bor-ing* kompared to shopping – oops, I mean, *kompared* – but I don't kare (just kidding). As long as I'm here, I want to see where my namesake, the French writer Colette, is buried. The resting places of Oscar Wilde, Isadora Duncan, Marcel Proust and Edith Piaf might also be worth a look-see, as would the graves of painters Modigliani and Delacroix. The burial ground of Gertrude Stein and her lover Alice B. Toklas might well round off my promenade. Yes, Père-Lachaise is a veritable Who's Who of illustrious poets, writers, musicians, statesmen, military heroes and other men and women of the world. My trash-TV idols and their dramas, diets and dirty laundry could move over a moment and let these other celebs captivate my attention. At least while I'm in Paris.

Map in hand, I launch my walk and lo! Before long I happen upon the memorial to Baron Haussman, the 19th c. architect who designed and created the Paris of today – the City of Light I love with its broad boulevards and grand sidewalk cafés. What a magnificent vision he had, rearranging the mishmash of streets that was a murky medieval Paris scarred by the French Revolution; with Haussmann’s art it became a splendor of symmetry and beauty. Not far is the grave of classical genius Frédéric Chopin, *the* Chopin, Polish-born virtuoso of the piano sonata. Also not far...well, *voilà*. The queen-size bed that belongs to Colette – at least that’s the approximate shape into which her granite memorial is fashioned. How fitting. Not only did the novelist often write *au lit*, but her themes in such classics as *Chéri* and *The Pure and the Impure* feature the politics of love, the messiness of passion, the fate of women compelled to reconcile sex and independence. In life Colette’s bed saw lots of action (she had three husbands and scores of lovers of both sexes); in death it looks solid enough for a good long recuperation. Well, she certainly earned her rest, having written maybe 50 novels and so many short stories I long ago lost count.

I wander and ponder. Grave after grave tells the tale of a life, however brief. One plain, black marble tomb has inscribed, “Franz Joseph Kramer Born December 10, 1873 Died February 15, 1875.” He was not even two. His brother, memorialized just beneath, lived only six days: “Franz Joseph Kramer Born August 13, 1876 Died August 19, 1876.” Here and there, entire families repose in mini cathedrals, small Chartres or Notre Dames made absolutely authentic with stained glass windows and elaborate altars. I peek through the wrought-iron gate of one and see beside Sèvres-looking objets d’art, several

gilt-framed photos; they are “beloved mother” and “cherished husband.” Outside, gargoyles with gruesome grins guard the small cathedral. I wonder at this family’s life, its trials, and its triumphs. Did the beloved mother, perhaps like Beyoncé, feel big pressure to get her before-baby body back before the red carpet? *No*. I suspect she had other interests, as did the two tall figures, in stone shrouds, who lie hand in hand on a monument nearby that says they met their end on April 15, 1875 – in a fall of 8,600 meters. Their family names, Croce-Spinelli and Sivel, are not famous, but at Père-Lachaise, it’s not essential to have had one’s 15 minutes to be buried in the same ground as stars like Proust and Balzac and Hugo, the literary lights whose monuments in death remind me of how much life, in characters vivid and storylines, too, their books embody. These fictional people thrive age upon age and even today.

The 147 nameless members of the 1871 Paris Commune who were shot by their own countrymen and buried where they fell, lie beside the Federalists’ Wall in the cemetery’s northeast corner. I note how the bullet holes in the rough stone wall recall the horror, and how the bodies now covered by begonia and ivy are testament to French history. Now, *there’s* a topic even messier than Colette could call her passions. I tramp up small hills and tromp down slight valleys. I find in Père-Lachaise a collection of dead who come colorfully to life via even the simplest memorial. In the giant Columbarium (from the Latin *columba*, meaning pigeon), the ashes of thousands are placed in vast walls of “pigeon holes.” Here is Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), she who died by broken neck when her scarf caught on the back axle of the convertible in which she was riding. In a plot outside, the warbling “little sparrow” Edith Piaf (1915-1963) is buried within a

black, flower-shrouded tomb marked with her married name, Madame Lambouskas. Both hint to me of women once upon a time whose talents were huge and accomplishments rocked. Would either today be a tabloid sensation, her every move stalked by paparazzi?

I mean, here's Isadora, saying no, thank you to classical ballet – all that fancy footwork – in order to invent a completely new form: modern dance. She wanted, she said in her day, to find “divine expression of the human spirit through the medium of the body's movement.” Isadora managed all this despite the loss of her two elder children and their nanny in an unspeakable tragedy: All drowned in the Seine the day their car plunged in. Here's Edith, abandoned by her parents, raised by prostitutes and, from ages three to seven, blinded by keratitis. She called it a miracle when St. Thérèse of Lisieux, she believed, ultimately restored her sight. The singer was so beloved by her public that 11 cars were needed to carry the flowers for her funeral, an event crowded with 40,000 fans. I wonder if a Real Housewife, known for her...her...well, let me think...for her knife-oomphed beauty? I wonder if she would be so honored.

To wander around Père-Lachaise is to ponder lives – and deaths – typically eventful. The cemetery was named after Père de la Chaise, who was King Louis XIV's confessor; it was inaugurated in 1804 by the Emperor Napoleon I. Whether it's a Gothic Revival chapel with elaborate gables, finials, and enough turrets and parapets to outfit a castle, or a headstone of Art Nouveau carving that evokes the hyper-stylish Paris of yesteryear, the grave markers here are tangible remembrances of intriguing lives and compelling times. There is the magician on whose tomb perch six winged skulls. Was it

the dark arts he conjured in his career? There are the monuments to the fallen of France: the 12,500 French deported to the concentration camp near Linz; the 10,000 French exterminated; the WWII survivors liberated in 1945. Here, the past lives on so as not to be forgotten. I promenade. I ponder. And next I happen upon the 12th c. lovers Abélard and Héloïse. They lie behind a fence of high, steel spikes. The luckless couple – he castrated and she forced to become a nun – were the first celebrity corpses relocated to Père-Lachaise when it first opened. The lovers had been interred elsewhere until the cemetery founders, in an opening-day marketing ploy, dredged them up to lure others to their new and novel property. If a potential client could say, hey, if Père-Lachaise is good enough for famous 12th c. tragic lovers, it is good enough for me, then the cemetery would have star appeal. The ploy worked. Also found here are the remains of the playwright Molière, author La Fontaine and the scribe behind *The Marriage of Figaro*. For centuries, anyone who is anyone, and plenty of nobodies as well, have made this burying ground a place of pride for the dead. At Père-Lachaise, life is affirmed in every personal story inscribed on marble, in every family portrait framed in gold.

Somehow, the *two* strawberry tarts I devoured for dessert now seem less worthwhile an obsession compared with what a woman like Héloïse, say, had to worry about. I'm guessing her hot-body diet didn't matter all that much in light of her lover's loss of his...you know.

Eventually, I gaze upon the grave of Gertrude Stein (1874-1946). Her name is carved in bold gold print, as is that of her partner Alice B. Toklas (1877-1967), who lies head to head directly behind. How Ms. Stein in her time ruled Paris! Her literary salons

of the twenties gathered together the greats: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Thornton Wilder. Her “lost generation” of expatriates defined the era with their art, as her protégé Hemingway immortalized in *A Moveable Feast*. And now, to see Stein’s final resting place brings those heady days to mind. Great artists. Great writers. Great parties in the same Left Bank cafés that still thrive today. When I happen next upon the grave of stage actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), a prince’s mistress turned courtesan, my imagination is aflame with the lives of those whose gifts made them legends. Or maybe it was their attendant eccentricities. For years of her life Bernhardt slept in a coffin in lieu of a bed – the better to understand her many tragic roles, she claimed. Can those who are famous for simply being famous – Honey Boo-Boo, I’m talking to you – say that?

Feet sore, sun setting – it’s time to leave Père-Lachaise by the Porte du Repos (door of rest) and return to Paris of the living. Spending the day among the dearly departed has left me full of wonder at the passions and pleasures, loves and losses – the lives – of those now ashes and bones. How funny. The lives of the living I follow with my passion (my problem?) with bad TV, leaves me feeling dead. But the dead of Père-Lachaise have me wildly alive – with interest, curiosity and the desire to discover more of everything that made them memorable. There is great peace at Père-Lachaise. Those long gone are not forgotten and within the parklands’ cathedral of green, the Paris birds sing.

But wait. Over there. By the grave of the Doors’ Jim Morrison, the musician dead at 27 of a drug overdose. The guy with the stringy hair and straggly goatee, the skinny

girl dressed in black behind glasses. Brad? Angie? Is that you? I scuttle to a headstone tall enough to hide behind and attempt a closer view. Is it? Is it? My heart leaps. My breath stalls. My eyes goggle and I...am...going...to...be...*awed*. No. Just a couple of look-alikes. Sigh. Sad but true: Some ridiculous addictions are tough to give up, no matter what.

CRÊPES AND CONVERSATION

Sissy says, “meet us at the crêperie,” and before she hangs up, I wonder if it will be weird, or what. “How will I know you?” I slip this in, sure she will say she looks exactly the same. “Expect me, but old,” she says. Her Austrian accent is as heavy as I remember. It’s been 33 years since Sissy and I taught skiing together two subsequent winters in St. Mortiz, Switzerland; it’s been 30 years since she married our boss, the suave French ski school director, Michel – known to us instructors as Mouche (“the fly”) for his fast and frenetic ski style. It has been exactly that long since we have seen one another. Sissy found me last year after a dogged internet search, and now our reunion draws nigh.

“Oh, Sissy.” I laugh. “Me, too: old.” We say *à toute à l’heure*, bye and ring off.

I run this by my parents. “Sissy and Mouche want to meet you,” I say. “They have arranged dinner at La Compagnie de Bretagne. It’s near Odéon.” Both lounge on the sofa of the *salon* of their Paris apartment, where I am vacationing for the week. Dad has a thick spy thriller in hand and Mom, the fake ivy topiary she’s repairing. Though Dad speaks not two words of French and Mom is game in the language, but limited, they will join me in reconnecting with European friends of my past because, as Mom says, brightening: “A crêperie! Who doesn’t love crêpes?” Plus, if Dad doesn’t get anything French-speaking Mouche says, or Mom misses most of German-speaking Sissy’s conversation, will it matter? Sissy does speak a smidge of English, I a large smattering of French, so I’m sure we can manage any conversational stalls that might happen as

different nationalities mingle. But really, with crêpes classic to the Brittany region the restaurant's specialty, and at least 20 varieties of artisanal cider on the menu, talking surely will take second to the pleasures promised by this dinner. The evening with one-time friends who, these many years later, are now foreigners might be weird, but we are certain to be well fed.

* * *

It's only a two-minute walk from the Métro stop Odéon to La Compagnie de Bretagne. Newly opened, the crêperie is gleaming, spotless. Its fresh, jet-black décor is made pretty by pots of pure white hyacinths on each table. Walking in we are assaulted by the scent of butter – gobs of butter – up to something wonderful in the see-through kitchen. There, chefs in tall toques look busy.

Suddenly: Sissy. She appears from nowhere – a smiling, shortish, brown-haired beauty who looks exactly nothing like I remember. Can it be simply the absence of her signature knit ski hat with its bobbing pompon?

“You!” she says and lunges-in for a European peck on each of my cheeks, plus a third to denote she considers me family.

“You!” I say and peck-peck-peck. Sissy looks at me and seems astonished. Surely I haven't changed *that* much in 33 years. I mean, really, hair dye well covers my gray and I am less hefty today – thank heaven – than I was as a 21-year-old overeater. Still, Sissy stares and stares and motions to Mouche to come forward for his own peck-fest, which he does.

“Ah, Colette! *Bonjour*,” says Mouche’s voice from a mouth attached to a face I swear I never have seen before.

“Mouche?” Where is the dark-brown beard, the dark-brown hair, the *hair* forever fixed in my mind as defining my one-time ski school boss?

“*Oui, oui, c’est moi*,” says the stranger, however handsome and fit as this one is.

“Mom, Dad, please meet Sissy and Mouche,” I say and scoot my parents forward from their place in the shadows. “Mouche, Sissy, *Je vous présent mes parents, Jacqueline et Tom*.”

Friendly pecks are pecked in plenty and next, the *maître d’* seats us a lovely table in the center of the dining room.

“*Le cidre pour tout le monde!*” says the man supposedly Mouche. With enthusiasm he insists we forthwith peruse the cider menu and choose from a staggering variety. There is *cidre doux*, sweet and only three percent alcohol, or *cidre brut*, strong and dry at five percent or higher. The sparkling selections represent the best of Brittany; each elixir of fermented apples is as evocative of its particular terroir as wine can be. Not speaking French and therefore not knowing his *tout le monde* from a *tutu* or even a *tiramisu*, Dad nonetheless gets the gist of what’s happening after Mom, seated to his left, flaps a menu at him and whispers, “Cider, decide on a cider.”

“No, no thank you,” says Dad, an AA’er from way back. He wags a finger and frowns at the man who calls himself Mouche. “No alcohol for Tom.”

“Ah das ist eine Schande, kein Alkohol,” says the woman who claims to be Sissy. Her lips turn down in incomprehension. “Michel, *un Perrier pour monsieur*.” Sissy

swings between German and French with the ease of a waiter going to-and-fro through a hinged kitchen door. Her English is also passable, but I can tell it fatigues her to speak it – all that tiring their and there and they're to keep straight, all those exhausting coughs and thoughts and throughs to pronounce just so.

“Jacqueline?” She turns to Mom. “Le Bretagne, do you know?”

Mom looks mystified by the menu she's studying, like it's written in Croatian and if only she could recognize something, anything, edible! She appears not to hear the woman I'm supposing is Sissy. If she were wearing our former ski school uniform, might I be better oriented?

“Brittany. Mom, you've been to Brittany – several times, right? I attempt to apply sound to the silence while Mouche, I notice, monopolizes Dad. He's telling him in French – fast French, frenetic French – about his recent summer adventure piloting a glider over the Swiss Alps. Dad nods with energy and smiles with delight – he even ekes out the occasional “yes, I see.” But he doesn't see the story at all; he couldn't, since it's a French story – a fact that doesn't bother in the least the man called Mouche. With a twinkle in his crinkly eyes and gestures that take up much air space, he sails into his next tale – something about something that involves a mountain climb in the Italian Dolomites.

“Michel! *Das ist nicht höflich!*” Sissy scolds. Mom can't understand the German but Sissy's disciplinary tone prompts her to surface from the depths of the menu to slide me look that says, *hmm, a marriage on the rocks?* Suddenly, my friends, the strangers are hugely fascinating. I remember well their romance. Sexy on skis and off, Mouche

and his French charm lured Sissy from her jealous Austrian husband; she was sick with guilt but powerless to resist the mating call of the Mouche. There were public scenes, private tears and, eventually, a honeymoon in Morocco. Their treasured love child, a daughter, must be all grown up today. *Are they happy?*

The waiter hovers, waiting for my order, but I want nothing so much as to connect with my long-lost friends and to know how they are, *really*. They have flown to Paris from their home in Vienna just to see me, and sure, they are eager for their daughter, Marie, to marry an American like maybe my brother, as Sissy once was not shy to suggest. But there must be some reason other than that – too bad, my brother is unavailable – that we sit here chit-chatting in no common language and search one another’s faces for signs of recognition.

“Excuse me, but...,” says Dad and interrupts Mouche’s tale of the time he and a buddy were scuba diving off the Great Barrier Reef and, *mon Dieu*, if they didn’t see a Great White with teeth “*comme ça!*” Mouche gestures to indicate larger than he is tall. “...what is the difference between a crêpe and a galette?”

I know that a crêpe is made with white wheat flour and a galette with buckwheat, but other than that, the super-thin, buttery pancakes are alike enough to make no difference to Dad. Sissy, however, must have misunderstood the question, for sooner than Mom can tell Dad to never mind, just order anything he can recognize rather than risk a crêpe filled with some startling, unwelcome gourmet surprise – this is France, after all – Sissy has summoned a chef from the kitchen.

“*Alors, les crêpes de Bretagne,*” she says, “*dites-nous l’histoire, s’il vous plait.*”

The chef beams. He’s happy to explain the history of the crêpe, the story of the galette, both of which were born in the west of France, but show up all around the world, from the *pannkaka* of Sweden to the *nalesniki* of Poland to the *krep* of Turkey. Whether it’s sweet with cinnamon, savory with sausage, or even flambéd with Grand Marnier to make a Crêpe Suzette, the delectable dish is so revered in France that a feast day is observed to honor it. Traditionally February 2 is *La Chandeleur*, or the day of Presentation of Jesus at the Table. But it is also esteemed as the *Le Jour Des Crêpes* – crêpe day. Local lore holds that if you can toss a crêpe in the air with your right hand, and catch it with a frying pan while holding a gold coin in your left, you will become rich that year.

“Sissy! *Ah, non! Que-ce-que c’est?*” Mouche shoos away the chef and takes an exasperated tone with his wife. He was born and *raised* in Brittany, he says, did she forget? Cider flows sweet in his veins and thus we are told to hold still while he recounts the ins, the outs, the ups, the downs, of the griddled delight we soon shall feast upon.

“Gosh,” squeaks Mom, “if we don’t order soon, the kitchen might just close.” I, too, am starving. Somehow our party isn’t exactly of one mind about the menu. True, there is the long list of ciders to choose among, and the selection of crêpes and galettes is daunting. Want it filled with ham? Ratatouille? Caviar or cheese? Deciding on what to order, however, is no job at all compared with finding in Sissy – can it really be she? – and adventure-man Mouche some common thread with which to stitch together a friendship now, today, apart from our long ago St. Moritz time together. Those days are

only notes of memory: the mountains, the snow, and Mouche, leaving love notes in Sissy's ski locker that her husband, in shock, eventually came upon.

“Michel,” Sissy suddenly says. “*Damit ist es genug bitte.*” Her husband had launched his tale on how crêpes came to be and was getting to the part where he needed to stand, shake his short, muscled body in a gesture of great pleasure, and say in stilted English, “Is good! Yes?”

“Yes!” we all say but it's clear Mom, Dad and I – we all have no idea what Mouche just said with his shake.

He has, however, been told to stop his nonsense. “*Oui, chéri,*” Mouche says and sits and is silent. *They might not be happy.*

Finally, our choices are decided, the cider is served – a Perrier for Dad – and Mom launches a charming story about her trip to Brittany and a visit to the famous Quimper Pottery factory.

“Each individual dish is *hand-painted*, if you can believe, by a woman in a hair-net,” she says. Not knowing more than “yes” or “good” of English, Mouche stares blankly at Mom and throws back his cider. Dad appears relieved to be freed for a moment from the snare of the shark story that asks him to respond as if he can just imagine Mouche's fright when how could he? He doesn't know what the hell the story is about. He studies the table's white hyacinth.

“*Was ist das für ein Haarnetz?*” Sissy seeks to understand what on earth Mom is talking about, but having already shushed her husband into silence, she sees he'll be no help and thus is forced to face what she'd rather not: English.

“Was is this, ‘hair net’?” The instant it is out of her mouth her shoulders sag. As tiring as English might be for Sissy, however, it’s no man’s land for my former boss who can’t quite place me.

“Tell me, Colleen...,” he says.

“Colette,” I correct.

“*Oui, oui, Colette. Alors, comment ça va?*” He wants to know how it’s going. I’m not quite sure. With flipping hands and a face full of motion Mom tries to explain a hair net, while Mouche, revived by the crêpes the waiter has put on the table, declares, “*Bon appétit!*” He elbows Dad as if to say, hey, listen to this. But before he gets too far into a drama involving what sounds like a plane he once was piloting, an Alp somewhere in France, a crevasse, and the rescue team with ropes and, more importantly, lots of brandy, Sissy speaks.

“Michel, *stoppen!*” She rolls her eyes, but I catch in them a light when she looks at her husband. Still, Mouche won’t stop and Mom is lost and Dad is deadened to all but his crêpe. “Say,” he says. “I thought I was getting a galette. This is not what I had that time in Brittany, is it?”

Crêpes and conversation with Sissy and Mouche is a reunion most strange for still, I am no closer to knowing how my friends of long ago are, really, his lifetime later. Perhaps I will just have to guess. In our lack of a common language we hardly are bonding, several glasses of cider or no. And aside from the efforts to connect we share – the friendly smiles, the polite head nods – any ongoing friendship I might wish with Sissy and Mouche does not much to go on.

But then, Mom takes a bite of her crêpe with egg and cheese.

Sissy ventures the first taste of her crêpe with ratatouille.

Dad and Mouche both bring first bites to their mouths and I, slicing into my crêpe of fresh artichoke do believe the waft of butter – gobs of it – that heralds the joy of taste coming my way will explain why all of us will meet again here, next year, as friends no doubt forever.

“Mmmm!” says Mom.

“Mm-mmm!” says Mouche.

“Mm-mm-mmm!” say Sissy and Dad, while I simply smile in secret pleasure.

All together now in the common culinary adventure we share, we stop talking altogether and savor our sensational crêpes.

Yes, I think they're happy.

THE MIRACLE OF PIERRE
(For Children)

In the heart of Paris along the river Seine, there is a pet shop called Le Chat Blanc. Here, in small cages, the animals wait. They wait for the family who wants to adopt them, and take them home to be loved and safe. There are fat swimming fish, skinny scurrying lizards and lots of furry kittens, who sleep atop one another in a purring pyramid. There's Jacques, the toucan with a beak of bright green, and a haughty exotic chicken (her name is Isabelle) who likes her cage tidy and clean. Day after day, while the animals wait, there is plenty of time to dream. Night after night, in their sleep the animals dream, *Oh, to be chosen by one who will give me a home, to be loved by the one who will make me their own!*

In a row of cages between Monsieur Maurice, a mild-mannered white mouse, and the fabulous Frédérique, a ferret looking oh-so-fine in her fur coat, there are those whose dreams are bigger than most. These are the puppies that hope to be lucky, the roly-poly pups that can't wait to be loved. And perhaps no puppy dreams of a happy home as hard as one. This is a wirehaired French fox terrier. His name is Pierre. And Pierre just wants to have fun.

Pierre the terrier loves to play even though his cage is so small. Pierre will jump straight up and roll 'til he's dizzy, chase his tail in a circle, and bark himself silly. Everyone who sees Pierre is amazed at the peppy puppy. How that dog would run if he could! they say. How he would chase butterflies, race after balls, romp with a sock, even leap into lakes. How Pierre would play, if only Pierre had a home.

Every day at Le Chat Blanc people come and people go. Each is in search of a pet to make all their own. And because this is Paris, a city so chic, the people (called Parisians) like their pets to be chic, too. And so: It simply won't do to promenade along the Boulevard Madeleine with a poodle whose pompon's askew. Or, to take tea in a sidewalk café with a Dalmatian whose spots are too few. The perfect pet for a Parisian is one that's in fashion, a dog or cat or bird or rat that is stylish – like a fine flowered hat.

As Pierre the terrier plays in his cage he is not sure he is all that chic. His fur feels too fuzzy and his paws big and clumsy. Then there is the matter of his tail. The way it wags this way and that without his say...well, Pierre is not sure such a tail is the fashion. Still, he waits. He waits all day for the family who wants him. Still, he plays. He plays into the night and hopes they come right away.

Days pass. People come and people go, and lots of puppies are adopted. Even the pug Edith Piaf, who turns up her nose at love, and General DeGaulle, a very bossy Lhasa Apso. But Pierre is not a puppy chosen.

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Far, far from Paris, in the land called America, there lives a very stylish boy whose outfits always match. If he wears blue shoes he puts on a blue hat, if his shirt is orange, so too is his cravat. The stylish boy's name is George.

“Isn't he always the height of fashion,” they say when George walks by in slacks with stripes exactly like those on his glasses. “All he needs now is a small, striped dog and he will look oh-so-fine. Fine enough for France!”

But George has a secret no one can guess, and it's not that the red of his socks is not the same red as his vest. No, the truth is, George is too sad to have a dog, striped or not. His best friend forever, a fox terrier named Terrence, has grown very old and died. All his long life the terrier Terrence did not fancy himself as stylish. His fur was too curly and his whiskers quite wispy. But, this never stopped him from loving life. A run in the park, a dig on the beach, or a swim in the sea – these are what made him happy. Now, Terrence is gone and George is not needed for tossing balls. He's not needed for Fetch-the-Stick; he has no reason to join in a swim. Now, rather than play away the day with his dog, George remains at home alone and misses his much-loved friend.

One day he decides: *A trip to Paris to see my Tante Maris might help me smile and forget my sadness awhile.* So the stylish boy gets dressed to travel in a shirt and pants and coat and hat he tries to match, but can't. With the death of Terrence it's such an embarrassment: George has lost his skill at style. He flies to France in a jet that is fresh, bright white not at all like his tie; at the door of his great-aunt's flat he finds it's precisely *not* the blue of his shoes, but black.

Still, he gasps at his first sight of the City of Light. "How beautiful!" He finds all of Paris a glow, from the Eiffel Tower to Notre Dame. The flowing Seine reflects dancing lights of the setting sun – it's magic. "And how fashionable everyone is," he notes, "with their dogs that match exactly." It is true. All around the city well-dressed Parisian *mesdames* and dapper French *messieurs* walk dogs that are *à la mode*. In the Luxembourg Gardens a pink-cheeked madame in a pink polka dot hat throws a polka dot ball for her pert Pekingese (his name is Pipi). He has, of all things, a pink polka dot

nose. In a sidewalk café on the Champs Elysées a stylish monsieur with a curvy moustache shares his sandwich with a chi-chi Shih Tzu. The Shih Tzu's whiskers are curvy, too.

George promenades through the city admiring the views and finds Paris exactly his style. Why, the Arc de Triomph is the color of his gloves and the old bridge Pont Neuf? It is lovely – in the way of his velvet muffler. But even with all the beauty around him, George thinks of Terrence. How he would love Paris! The stylish boy's family and friends say again and again that, to get over his loss, he should adopt a new dog. But George is firm and sure. *It's much too soon, I'm still so sad*, he insists. *And that is that...is that.*

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At Le Chat Blanc, people come and people go, and lots more pets get adopted. Gaughin the gabby grey goose goes to live at the Opéra with a very kind man who calls himself "the Phantom." Cecile the skinny lizard has a new home with Cedric, a skin-and-bones boy whose house is a boat that floats on the Seine. The guinea pig twins Yves and Veronique are adopted by tall twin sisters who love to shop and live on the tip-top floor of Printemps, the big department store. Even the fabulous fur-coated Frédérique! She is carried out of the shop in a furry-topped box by a bearded monsieur who from hat to socks is dressed – can you guess? – entirely in fur. It's fake, to be sure. Yes, at Le Chat Blanc, lots of pets are adopted. But not, alas, Pierre.

"Does this mean I am not in fashion?" he asks one day, and his little triangular ears flop back. This is what they do when Pierre feels afraid, or worried or sad.

“Who’s to say?” offers Monsieur Maurice. The mild-mannered white mouse has just been plucked from his bed of straw by an Impressionist painter by the name of Clarice. She will take him home with her to Montmartre. There, he will live in an artist’s atelier with his new brother Monet, a creative calico cat.

“Have courage, Pierre,” says Duc d’ Antoine, an aristocratic rat in a gilded cage placed high on a shelf near the upside-down bats. “The one who will love you and make you their own will come when you least expect it. Be ready!”

Lola agrees. She is the yellow Labrador in the cage to the left of Pierre. “Don’t lose heart, Pierre,” she says. Just then, a glamorous, long-legged dancer – with a plume of fuchsia feathers on her head – opens the door to Lola’s cage, lifts the Lab into her arms, and says, “Do you want to come with me, my darling *chérie*?” Lola gets a pink lipstick kiss on the nose. “The Club Moulin Rouge will be your new home – let’s go!” From her place cuddled in Mademoiselle’s arms, the yellow Lab adds:

“There is a family that matches you exactly, Pierre, a home that’s just your style.”

“But what if I don’t *have* style?” says the terrier. He worries that his fur (too fuzzy) and his paws (big and clumsy) are the reason he’s always passed by. Then again, Pierre was born in a cage on a country farm, where puppies are bred for business. His mother never was meant to have a home or be someone’s pet, just to give birth, again and again. Pierre was only three weeks old when taken from her and sent to France to be sold. Perhaps he, too, is supposed to live his whole life in a cage, without a home, until he is very old? Just the thought of it makes Pierre shiver as if he were cold.

“Style is not something you *have*, it’s something you *are*,” calls Isabelle, the haughty exotic chicken, from her cage all tidy and clean.

“And what you are *will* find its True Place in the world,” squawks Jacques the toucan with his beak of bright green, cracking a sunflower seed.

“My True Place?” says Pierre.

“Yes, the special place that is nothing less than your dearest Heart’s Desire.”

“Every puppy has one,” calls Lola as Mademoiselle clips on a collar and leash and trots the dog toward the door. “Even you, Pierre, *au revoir*.” Then, just like that, Lola is gone. *So long*. Pierre knows he will never see the lovely Lab again. His ears flop back and worse, he cannot get them to stand. But it doesn’t make the puppy happy to be sad, so he tries to forget about hoping for a home; instead he chases his tail like mad.

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The sun sparkles on the Seine and the Paris day is dazzling. George is up with the sun and shares with Tante Maris *café au lait* and a baguette with jam. Then, he asks if he may stroll the streets and perhaps admire the fashions.

“*Mais, oui*,” says Tante Maris, “go do enjoy Paris,” and off George goes to explore. Walking along the Quai de la Mégisserie, he happens upon Le Chat Blanc. “Why, it’s a French pet shop, I would like to stop,” he says to himself, “but only to take a look.” The silver doorbells tinkle when George enters the shop and the birds begin chirping, the cats commence meowing and the puppies start barking nonstop.

“Oh, no,” he says of the pet shop pandemonium. “So many creatures that need homes!” He braces himself to peer into each cage; he’s afraid of the sad animal eyes that will look into his with hope: *Have you come for me? Will you take me away?*

“Hello, Dachshund.”

“Hi there, Chihuahua.”

“Greetings, you sweet Springer Spaniel.”

He greets the puppies one by one until he comes to the cage with Pierre. At once his heart backflips; the dog is the exact same type as Terrence – a fox terrier.

“What a handsome French *fox* you are,” George says. “*Bonjour.*”

From the display window a Siamese kitten named Louis XVI calls out from within the purring pyramid of his seven sisters sleeping. “That puppy is Pierre,” he meows, “and he is very sweet.”

Marie Antoinette, a turtle in a glass lagoon who suns under a lamp shaped like a palm tree, agrees. “No trouble at all!” she calls.

All the animals of Le Chat Blanc can see how Pierre’s coat of white and black is not a match in the least with George, whose shirt today is green as a salamander. But the pets of the shop love Pierre – as much as love can love. They want to help; they will try because...well, George might be the special one! He will give Pierre a home; he will make Pierre his own. They hope. Even though, strictly speaking, they clash.

“Hey there, playful terrier,” George says. He opens Pierre’s cage to pet him, and notes how the puppy is much larger than the others – much older. “It has been months and months; why has no one adopted you?” Pierre’s terrier heart feels ready to burst with

hope – a home! – but then he remembers: Stylish and chic is the kind of puppy to be, a fashion match as well. He thinks of his wig-wagging tail with a life of its own, his skinny legs and cold, wet nose. Before he can stop them, there they go: his ears flop back.

“It’s okay, don’t be frightened,” George says and pets Pierre’s wiry muzzle.

“There is a person just perfect for you. There is. It’s true! I would take you home with me to America, but....I...” George cannot think of one actual reason why he cannot adopt the terrier. Just that in his heart he knows what he knows, and all he knows is this: His heart is with Terrence, who’s missed. *It’s too soon, I’m not ready, I can’t*, he thinks. *And that is that...is that.*

George shuts the door of Pierre’s cage, runs out of Le Chat Blanc and tries to forget his feelings. He admires the paintings in the Picasso museum, eats sorbet of peach on the Ile St. Louis, and says to Tante Maris that evening, “Yes, I had a very nice day, *Merci.*”

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Weeks pass. At Le Chat Blanc, people come and people go, and more and more pets get adopted. Pierre is still not chosen. “It must be true,” he whimpers one afternoon. “I am simply a pup not stylish enough, not meant, in the end, for a home.” He decides that, since no one will want him – ever, he may as well make the most of the cage in which he will live – forever. So, he romps with a sock, he chews a squeak toy, he bites at the flies that buzz by. He plays and plays to pass the days and makes believe he’s happy.

“Oh, Pierre,” don’t let go of your dream,” says Josephine, a charming Chihuahua in the cage above who isn’t fooled by Pierre’s charade. Her mate, the naughty Rottweiler

Napoleon, playfully chews her ear. “The one who will love you and make you their own is a match more important than fashion. And really,” she adds, “if what you find is a *true* heart’s desire, whatever its style, it will always be right!”

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In Tante Maris’s flat the stylish boy tries to be happy, too. But something’s the matter with George, something he can’t understand. Often his tie will be dotted and his socks will be splotched, his pants will be plaid, and his hat? Why, his hat will be zigged and zagged. The something the matter with George is that George is *completely* mismatched.

“I’m just not right, I’m topsy-turvy with worry,” he says to his aunt, at last. “I hope that terrier Pierre gets a home in a hurry.” The stylish boy worries for days; he worries for weeks. He wears stripes with checks; he wears yellow with green. Finally, the day comes when his shiny orange shoes look so shockingly bad with his suit of chartreuse that George knows he must do something big...and fast.

I will find the family that poor puppy matches, he tells himself. I won’t be right until that happens. And that is simply...that.

And so: The mismatched boy travels to and fro to find Pierre a home.

He floats on a boat down the Seine and asks the Parisians again and again: “Would you like a puppy to love, Monsieur? Will you give a good home to Pierre, Madame?” He says this first to a silly mademoiselle with bells on her umbrella. She holds on her lap a fat tom cat with bells in the braid of his tail; his name is Nutella. “Oh, no, *merci*,” says she.

He catches the Métro to Montmartre and asks the clerk who sells sea shells on the steps of the church Sacre Coeur. “*S’il vous plait*, Monsieur, would you like to add to your family a frolicsome *fox*?”

“Heavens, no,” says he. “I have a shaggy sheepdog whose name is Shelli and she is quite enough, indeed.”

At the Louvre he asks a boy and girl who gaze at *Mona Lisa*. “Are you the people just perfect for Pierre?”

“Sorry,” says the girl, “but Jules, my jolly gerbil, would never be friends with a dog. Not at all!”

He asks in cafes, he pops into shops; he stops at a fruit stand on the sidewalk.

“I would adopt Pierre myself if I could, but I can’t,” he tells the stand’s madame. In her hand she holds fresh, purple plums and pears, nice and plump. “Adopt him myself, adopt him myself,” squawks a pink parrot perched on her shoulder. “But can’t.”

Days pass and George continues to ask, but the people of Paris all say no to adopting the puppy Pierre. George becomes glum and then glummer. What’s more, with his glasses the color of grass and his hat as black as a cat, he has never been more mismatched. Something’s *really* the matter with George, something he can’t understand!

At Le Chat Blanc, the kitten Louis XVI and turtle Marie Antoinette both go to loving homes. Duc d’Antoine does, too: the aristocratic rat goes to live in a grand gardener’s cottage at the Palace of Versailles. And Pierre? Well, the terrier just keeps growing.

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By and by the day arrives when George must return to America. He tried to find Pierre a home, but to the people of Paris the puppy is not *à la mode*. Pierre is not petite like a Papillon, so compact he can be carried around town in a tote. He is not handsome like a dachshund, so dashing in his tiny trench coat. George tried, but now he must leave Pierre behind. “What happens to the dogs that don’t get adopted?” at last he asks Tante Maris. And she replies, “oh, *Chérie*, surely to know is a bother. Let’s not.” Do they live to old age in their pet shop cage? Do they grow too big and get sent away? To where? Tears sting George’s eyes but he tries not to cry. Instead, he is firm and sure: *I must be brave and say goodbye. I must trust the people for Pierre will arrive...in time.*

The silver bells tinkle when George enters the shop, and, while the birds chirp and the cats meow, the puppies bark nonstop.

“He has come for Pierre, he’s going to give him a home!” bow-wows Bettie the red Irish setter, the loudest. Hughie the hairy Siberian husky howls too: “He’s coming to love him and make him his own!” Pierre’s ears perk straight up to hear this. But when George walks up to his cage the terrier can tell: something’s the matter, *this isn’t right*. George looks so sad, like he might even cry.

“Here I am, Pierre, just one last time,” the boy begins. “I have come, Pierre, to say goodbye.” Two or three tears trickle to his chin. The tears seem destined to become a mighty river, a flood, but then: The silver doorbells tinkle. A beautiful mademoiselle hurries into Le Chat Blanc. She is huffing and puffing from running.

“Oh, oh, oh, I must adopt a puppy *toute de suite*,” says she. Mademoiselle is dressed entirely in white. She wears white feather glasses and carries a white jeweled purse.

“Oh, how chic!” remarks Pauline, a pretty Pomeranian. “Wouldn’t I thrill to be carried around Paris in a purse so white and petite.” The other puppies agree, and each secretly hopes this stylish mademoiselle will be the one to take them home and love them as her own.

“Pick me!” yips Fifi the fluffy white Maltese. “I’m a match exactly.”

“No, me!” barks Bart the stubborn bulldog. He shows-off his fine canine physique by turning around and around with glee. “*Oui, oui*, pick me!”

But Mademoiselle looks quickly at each yipping puppy without much interest or care. Until she spies The One: Pierre.

“What a fine looking French fox terrier,” she exclaims and peers into his cage. “How would a sweet puppy like you like to be loved by me?” Pierre’s ears do not perk at the words he has longed so long to hear. Yes, something’s the matter with Pierre, something he can’t understand.

“*Excusez-moi*, Monsieur,” Mademoiselle addresses George. “If you are not interested in this puppy, then I will adopt him for sure. Do you mind? Living with me he will be the absolute *haute of couture*.”

It’s true. In Mademoiselle’s Paris apartment, a wiry white rug has a splotch of black the very same shape as the spot on his back; the drapes are swagged to swoop down

like the fur of his tail when it wags. There can be no doubt. Mademoiselle and Pierre make the perfect pair.

“However, there is a problem that first I must solve,” says the woman in white. “How will I get this puppy home? He is too big to fit in my white jeweled purse. And if he walks on a leash, his white fur feet will get dirty. That will never do.” She blinks behind her white feather glasses. “Dirty fur feet have no place in my home so white and clean.”

“Allow me, Mademoiselle,” says George, polite as a gentleman. “I’ll bring Pierre to you myself. I’ll give him a bath, I’ll brush him fluffy; he will smell so sweet, like fresh clean puppy. *“S’il vous plait, Mademoiselle, allow me.”*”

George is thrilled to help. Imagine! If Pierre goes with Mademoiselle, he will live in a grand apartment in Paris. For breakfast, he will enjoy a buttery croissant; evenings, he might dine in any charming brasserie he wants. If he doesn’t bark or scratch, Pierre even will have his own chaise at the table. George’s dearest desire has been – has it not? – to find a home for the dog so long unwanted. And now, now it is actually happening.

“Come on Pierre,” let’s go!” he says. He tries to pull the puppy from his cage, but Pierre, confused, backs away. Not once in his life has he been outside. The friendly sun will be warm on his nose, but he doesn’t know. The ticklish breeze will fluff him from whiskers to toes. Mademoiselle pays Pierre’s price to the clerk, and George tries again. “Come on, Pierre, you won’t be hurt.” The terrier crouches low and s-l-o-w-l-y allows

himself to be put on a leash and led. Outside Le Chat Blanc, his first sight of Paris is frightening. He trembles with each tentative step.

“Look, Pierre, look!” says George. The gilded buildings, the busy boulevards, the magnificent Eiffel Tower! The terrier shivers and shakes behind George’s leg, for he cannot help but fret: *This city’s so pretty and what about me? Am I sure to be wrong and not chic?*

In a shop window, the stylish boy sees a navy blue beret just Pierre’s size. He dashes in to buy it and puts it on the puppy.

“There, Pierre,” he says. “Now you look like an *authentic* French fox terrier.” Wearing a beret makes Pierre feel more like himself, it’s true. More handsome than before. Bolder. Slowly, he comes out from behind George’s leg and together they stroll the tree-lined path by the Seine. They pass by the Louvre with its glass pyramids and enter the Tuileries gardens, with its beautiful flowers in bloom. Children stop and want to play. *With me?* Pierre asks with his eyes, and George says, “*Oui, oui*, Pierre, this is how it should be.”

The puppy so long unwanted dreamed a big dream indeed. But he scarcely can believe that such a joy is real. He chases the children in circles; he leaps and spins, he growls and grins. Pierre is so full of fun that, watching them play, George feels his heart fill with something very strange.

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Later, at Tante Maris’s flat, Pierre has his bath and a good long brushing. In front of a warming fire, he naps – his head on George’s lap. The stylish boy looks down and

notes how his cool teal shoes are a sight with his hot mauve pants. “I am so ill-matched that something really, *truly* is the matter,” he says to himself. “Why do I not understand?”

The puppy awakens, and being Pierre, wants to play. George can’t resist. The biggest park in Paris is the beautiful Bois de Boulogne. And so to the Bois they go.

“This just means you’ll need another bath,” George warns. But Pierre is happy no matter. Along the boulevard that leads to the park, the smell of Paris treasures – fresh baked bread from the boulangerie and hot roasting chickens of the *traiteur* – make the terrier’s nose twitch with newfound pleasures.

The afternoon hours whiz by in a dizzying blur of play. In the Bois there are flowers to sniff and dirt for digging. And when George tosses balls in the air that Pierre leaps sky-high to catch, the stylish boy is not aware – he doesn’t care! – that his vest of checks and socks of dots don’t match.

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“There’s a good terrier.” After Pierre’s second bath and good, long fluffing, George places the beret on the puppy’s head and smooths his face with a brush. “Today has been more fun than I have had in ages” he says, “but your new home with Mademoiselle awaits.” Something inside him wants to be said – something important. But what? George is so befuddled his every thought is a muddle! In lieu of knowing, all he can do is give the puppy a pat and a big brave smile. Pierre’s ears flop back. Flopped back they stay. “Well, then, I guess we better get going.”

They ride the Métro to Mademoiselle's home on the Avenue Foch. George carries Pierre so his feet stay pristine and soon, they stand in her fresh, white foyer.

"Pierre!" she says and greets them, hello. "Welcome to your new home." It is magnificent. Amid fresh, white niceness found hither and thither, there is a designer doggie bed fluffed with white feathers, and toys piled high in a box of white leather. Even "Pierre the Terrier" written in script is engraved on a gold dinner dish. Pierre's new home is a dream grander than any Paris terrier can imagine. *Can it mean at last, Pierre wants to ask, I will be loved and happy?*

"Come, Pierre," says Mademoiselle. "Bid *au revoir* to the boy who brought you. Come to your new *maman*." Pierre isn't all that sure such is the thing to do, for shouldn't she say, "I love you"? He looks at George to see what to do and instantly knows the truth: Something's the matter, things simply aren't right. The stylish boy has a look, like he can't say goodbye! In Pierre's terrier heart, something small starts to grow. It grows larger...and larger...and **larger**. And then it's so huge it can't fit! Can it be? It is: His dearest Heart's Desire. Pierre's ears perk straight up. Inside George, too, something shifts. Suddenly, everything that clashed before now matches. Can it be? Indeed. It is his understanding.

"Pierre is meant to be mine!" George cries.

"Why, what a ridiculous thing," says Mademoiselle. "Even I can see how the puppy's black spot and ears that flop are no match at all for you, a boy whose socks aren't dots and whose ears...well, they don't perk like Pierre's that's for certain."

But what Mademoiselle can't see, even with her white feathered glasses, is what is shown only to a heart that knows. It's a desire that is real and true. It's a love as shared by two. To Pierre, his heart's desire feels like something new, something wonderful; it is what he has never known: a home. He jumps straight up, up into George's arms.

"Well," says Mademoiselle, "I suppose nothing can stand between those who are meant to be. On second thought..." She picks up her white jeweled purse. "Perhaps Fifi the fluffy Maltese is a more perfect match for me. I must hurry to Le Chat Blanc and adopt her – quickly! – before she is gone. *Au revoir!*" With that she dashes off.

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When George flies home to America, in the company of Pierre, his new puppy, his stylish red suit and chic cherry shoes go together beautifully. His sea-blue cravat looks sharp with his sky-blue hat. In short, the very stylish boy is matched to a T, if you please. And Pierre? Well, the wirehaired French fox terrier is excited to come to America; he is absolutely *à la mode* in his beret.

"What an uncanny coincidence," George says to friends who marvel at his happiness. "That woman in white walked into Le Chat Blanc not simply the day, not simply the hour, but *the exact same moment* I was saying goodbye to Pierre – forever. If she hadn't..." He stops to shake off the unhappy thought. "...I would have left him behind. It's as if Pierre's being with me was meant to be."

Was the puppy not adopted by anyone else because fate made him wait – as long as it would take – for George? And did Love in its mysterious way give the boy and

Pierre time to play, those many days in Paris, so George could be shown that, when it comes to loving a special dog, for the heart it's never too soon to start?

Who is to say? Just look, too, at Mademoiselle. The woman in white is so happy with *her* new friend Fifi (the fluffy Maltese), that their finding each other also seems like a match made in, well, Paris.

Naturally, George and Pierre are living happily ever after in America. For that is how miracles work. And that is that...is that.

PART TWO: ELSEWHERE

SUN VALLEY WITH DAD

“It’s like I’m the dog,” says Dad in the back seat. “I never know what we’re going to do until we do it.” My sister is at the wheel and I’m riding shotgun as we pull off I-80 east outside Elko so the Flying J truck stop can refuel us with gas and also salty cashews. At age 83 Dad has lost his hearing to the extent, say the doctors, a 747 can rev for take-off next to him and one ear would not even know; the other might have a hint. So it’s a surprise, our stop, since Dad missed the discussion leading up to it. But he is game for whatever adventure the Flying J flings at us.

“You girls get whatever you like,” he says and rolls down the window to test the temperature of the Elko air. I flash on our childhood fox terrier, Molly, who on the road loved to sniff strange climes from the car. “This is *your* trip.”

Our trip is a ski weekend in Sun Valley. It’s a weekend worth the 13-hour drive to Reno and across the vast, flat stretch of Nevada north to Twin Falls and north some more into that part of Idaho where the Smokey Mountains promise snow. Worth it for the ski fever burning me up with yearning and the gotta-get-out-of-Dodge feeling seizing Camille. Dad is along, for there is no way in hell a car is headed to Sun Valley without him in it, as the dog or not. A lifelong skier, he has been making the trip at least once a year since high school in ’41, and the resort dubbed “an American Shangri-La” after its discovery by a scouting Austrian count in 1935, thrills him each and every time.

And, really, how could it not? With 2,054 skiable acres offering a descent of 3,400 vertical feet of fun, Sun Valley’s Bald Mountain – beloved as “Baldy” – has 13

high-speed lifts, 65 varied runs and a handful of on-mountain ski lodges made warm and sumptuous by oriental carpets on the floors, snazzy granite in the bathrooms and massive rock hearths kept blazing all day. In a sport known for its cold and discomfort and crowds and, yes, expense, Sun Valley's efforts to eliminate all trace of...well, *suffering*, result in a rare ski experience of remarkable beauty and comfort.

We feel completely Thelma and Louise, my sister and I. The freedom of the road and the whizzing-by vistas empty of all but the occasional grazing cows, wind-whipped tumbleweeds and lonely-looking homesteads with names like Rancho Costa Plenty soothe our city-singed nerves. We talk nonstop and laugh, and Dad in the back nods off often. On the outskirts of Jackpot, Nevada's last stop for gamblers enamored of burgs built exclusively of neon, I twist in my seat to see if he's breathing and regard the deep-blue shiner under his left eye, the small scabby gash on his nose. Last month's ski accident.

"Now, I don't want you girls to push me," he had said at lunch hours earlier when we stopped at a casino café in Winnemucca. Our perky server Angie, who was, she claimed, age 91 and bent nearly double from osteoporosis, scribbled his BLT order onto her pad with a gnarled-knuckled hand and zinged me a wicked wink. I swear that wink said, *Go ahead. Push old Pops all you want – he can take it. We're tougher than you think.*

"Don't worry, Dad," said Camille as slot machines pinged and dinged in the background. "Everyone at their own speed."

“I’m afraid I could be finished,” he said, suddenly glum. “My balance is shot and when the light gets flat I can’t see a goddamn thing. If I let myself get tired....” Well, it will be a Dad on the ski slope crashed, we knew. Not once in at least 70 years has the Ski Patrol had to haul Dad off the mountain in an emergency sled, and to have that humiliation visit him *now*, with us, simply was not the hope Camille and I had for the weekend. We would not insist he ski with us. As always.

So now as we zoom through Ketchum, the Idaho town that’s both home to Sun Valley and renown for its famous former resident, Ernest Hemingway – he now buried in its cemetery – I worry, what if.... *Dad? Finished?*

All my life, never a ski season did pass that our dad of derring-do didn’t base his entire self-perception (it seemed) on the state of his skiing. From “the steep” he reached via helicopter in the Canadian Bugaboos to “the deep” of the powder in Utah, from the Sierra’s spring slush to the wide open bowls of Colorado, no snow or slope was beyond his ability or out of the bounds of his ardor. I cannot even imagine it, our all-terrain Dad slow-poking down the bunny hill or, worse, rotting in the day lodge where non-skiers and the injured sit around waiting – and waiting – for their friends or family to come in.

And yet: After a couple more miles we motor up to the door of the Sun Valley Lodge and two young doormen in uniform unload our skis and bags, bags that in the swank of the surroundings look especially old and sad and as down at the heels as we now feel. Compared with the hunky, handsome doormen Dad appears particularly wobbly and gray – almost Angie-like in posture – but he strides into the lobby like he’s Averell Harriman himself and charms the check-in girl with his signature suavity. Mr.

Harriman, the Union Pacific Railroad chairman who in 1935 purchased the 4,300 acres of Smokey Mountain marvel that was to become the resort, at the time said, “When you get to Sun Valley, your eyes should pop open.” Mine certainly do at the lodge’s enduring allure. No wonder Hollywood legends like Clark Gable and Errol Flynn made the place their winter favorite. No wonder alpine Olympians like Picabo Street and Cristin Cooper did, too. The lodge is so old-school beautiful with its glass-enclosed pool, ice-rink view and wood-beam, flower-frilled rooms that of course Hemingway in the fall of ’39 chose to finish *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in suite 206. The place reeks of history, elegance, class. Never mind how hard times have rooms, *including lift ticket*, going for \$100 a night per person; this means riff-raff now slump in the lobby in rude attitudes, their feet on the furniture, their cell phones in use. We are riff-raff, too, alas. But at least we have Dad, who knows well enough that when staying in the Sun Valley Lodge, one does not après-ski wander the halls on the way to the pool (heated to 103 degrees) without first donning the white spa robe and slippers supplied. This we do straightaway to revive from our drive. And as the cocktail server circles the pool in which hotel guests bob (or is it imbibe?) their way to a Sun Valley high, I notice Dad soaks with an air of tense apprehension.

“Are you okay, Dad?” asks Camille. He paddles due north away from her voice, not hearing.

“Dad?” Now louder. “DAD!”

He paddles back, not hearing.

“Listen,” he says, “tomorrow I want you girls to leave me at the base of Warm Springs. I’m going to take it easy. I’m just not sure about my shoulder.” He wings his right arm this way and that, testing, splashing. The same ski fall that blackened his eye and gouged his nose with his glasses also did a thing to his shoulder. And now the bitch of it will nix him from riding the gondola to Baldy’s 9,150-foot elevation where the upper runs and chutes and bowls offer skiing supreme in a sprawl of challenging terrain that not *that* many years ago Dad would never have found too much for him.

When he rises from the pool, pale and dripping, Dad’s spindly chicken legs look like they couldn’t handle even the gentle, smooth slope of lower Warm Springs. And when he stumbles over a poolside chaise to retrieve his robe and nearly mows over a trio of spa-robed people dipping their toes in the pool, I wonder if he has any business on skis at all. My heart so sinks me in the water I hardly can rise myself, but still: There is something fierce in Dad’s refusal to believe he’s 83, something hell-bent on sharing the Sun Valley experience with Camille and me like he’s the same skier he was back in the day he’d hike a whole mountain, skis on his shoulder, because, really, what did it matter that they hardly had yet invented the chairlift?

What I mean is here he is next morning, knocking on the door of our room before breakfast, *before coffee*, and standing there in parka and pants and helmet with goggles, standing there *in ski boots*, if you can believe. We cannot.

“I’m ready,” slurs a still-sleeping Camille from somewhere deep, deep within the strange luxury and unaccustomed comfort of the lodge’s sheets, sheets whose thread count surely is in the tens of thousands. “I’ll only be a sec.”

“Don’t hurry,” says Dad and clomps awkwardly in. I hold the door open dressed in shower cap and towel. “When you’re ready you girls can get the bus to River Run. I’ll see you for lunch.”

“Dad,” I say, “the lifts don’t open for a few hours. You’ve got your *boots* on?”

“I don’t want to push it and try to keep up with you girls,” he says. “I’m concerned...”

“About your shoulder?”

About his shoulder, his balance, his eyesight, his hearing, his strength, his speed and, not least, his very essence as a skier. Should bad falls or, worse, bad form on even Baldy’s beginner runs cut into his confidence or take him off the hill for good, what then? For a brave millisecond I go there, to the fright-filled place I don’t normally dare: *No Sun Valley with Dad? Ever again?*

No more lunches at Ketchum’s Cristina’s, where the homemade soups and thick Idaho fries are killer delicious? No more dinners of fresh-caught fish from famous Silver Creek River savored at the homey Ketchum Grill? And – too, too tragic! – no more après-ski evenings watching the people and loving the mood, the food and the music of the legendary local restaurant, The Pioneer? These are a few of Dad’s Sun Valley favorites, pleasures he will share with my sister and me this weekend. So though he is in his element, and (honestly!) in his boots well before breakfast, eager and energetic, I ache to protect my dad from cruel reality, to blurt through tears I think he’s the best skier in the world, the best Dad, and that every year, always, there will be for us, Sun Valley.

Instead I send him off with a scolding. “Dad,” I say, my tone snippy, “Please don’t run to try and get the bus, and please will you watch the ice on the stairs, and please *please* if you...”

“Now, I want you girls to dress extra warmly,” he interrupts, entirely missing the gist of my admonishment. “It might be cold up there.” He starts to clomp awkwardly out.

“Have a wonderful morning, Dad,” I say and intercept him long enough to peck his cheek with a subzero kiss, icy with the worry we are sending him off to an uncertain fate at Warm Springs. “We’ll ski together after lunch.” He lurches a little after a few clompy steps down the hall, and coming upon the maids’ cart catches the buckle of his stiff, bulky boot. It is a maneuver that nearly topples him. Suddenly, I feel naked in my helplessness before time, horribly vulnerable to what, I don’t know.

Maybe it’s the shower cap and towel.

“You girls be sure you have your mittens,” he calls back after righting himself and clomping on. My sister and I are in our 50s and yet Dad still refers to our ski gloves as mittens, same as when we were six and he sent us off to ski school so he and Mom, giddy, could flee (fairly screaming) to the slopes sans kids.

“It’s okay, Dad,” calls Camille, now roused from her swoon. “We’ve got our mittens.”

* * *

From the top of Baldy the Pioneer Mountains to the east and the Sawtooths to the north envelop us in jagged peaks of thrilling skiing promise. Snow! The gondola has

dropped Camille and me sky-high and below, the Seattle Ridge runs unfurl in a fun I can't wait to have embrace us. Said by Sun Valley hype to be greatest single ski mountain in the world for its absence of wind, substantial vertical drop and abundance of varied terrain, Baldy beckons and baby, ain't nobody going to take exception to that. We're off. My sister and I? Well, we ski and ski and ski still more until...well, until our legs can't take it. Or maybe it's until one chair ride up the Blue Grouse run Camille asks, "Do you think we should check on Dad?"

We race a winding way down to Warm Springs, unsure of what we'll find and there he is, kicking back on the sun-soaked terrace of the day lodge, his cup of tea hot, his mood, inscrutable.

"How did it go, Dad?" I tense for his answer, for if he says not bad or okay or pretty well, it means his skiing was awful.

"How *is* it?" he says, leaping up in greeting and suddenly as animated as Molly might have been to see us after a morning's separation. "Did you girls find Limelight? Was it great? How is the snow?" We had, indeed, found his favorite black diamond, hence most difficult run, and Dad's happy, eager expression tells me he wants to hang on our every word – if only he could. I hope our excitement alone tells well our Limelight tale. Somehow.

"No, *you*," says Camille, exaggerating her mouth and pointing at Dad. "How did it go for *you*?"

He looks off toward the band, now warming up to serenade sunning skiers with peppy retro renditions of Loggins and Messina.

“I’m giving it time to soften up,” he says, sobering. He does not meet our eyes. “Maybe after lunch.”

Later in the gondola Camille and I go over how bad it is that Dad is thinking he might be finished. And how we will handle it if the afternoon goes like the morning and he sits it out on the terrace, not even trying out his chicken legs, letting his black eye and bum shoulder and balance on the skids hold him back from being so much of who he is. A skier. What will we do with him? What will he do with himself? What if. What then.

After lunch, however, the Sun Valley slopes seduce us into our own love affair with brilliant Idaho sun, fantastic, well-groomed snow, and run after run – after run – of simply sensational skiing. The afternoon passes in bliss as big as the burn in our thighs. Then, too soon, a few late afternoon clouds gather to flatten the light and tell us it’s time to go in. It’s our last run down when I develop a foreboding *ugh* in my gut that when we catch up with Dad, it will be back at the lodge. He’ll be working the crossword between cat naps, his shoulder on ice or his strained knee bandaged. Or worse.

Over. It will be over and the spell of Sun Valley with its special tradition of showing Dad to his best advantage – he is, after all, one of its longest-running and most ardent acts – will be *poof!* broken. And the magic of this day, this place, will be gone for Camille and me as skiers and daughters, who, because of Dad alone, in our lives always remember our mittens.

We schuss down Flying Squirrel, down and down. We arrive at the Warm Springs base and, as expected, don’t see Dad.

“He probably got an early bus back to the lodge,” says Camille.

“Or he could be still on the hill,” I offer, hopeful. I imagine him on the hill, weighting and unweighting his skis with excellent technique; turning left, turning right with his athletic grace intact and his famous rhythm, undiminished. I imagine his thrill and his pride and his smile when he sums up his run for us later. “It was great!” he’ll say, his passion for the umpteen millionth descent of his skiing career as fresh and fierce as it was for his first as a child in the ’30s.

“Well, I don’t know,” says Camille.

We both without thinking look to the mountain, and not on lower but *upper* Warm Springs, steep and moguled, there is, by God, a dot of red on the move. Dad. It’s not his ruby parka but rather his form that positively i.d.s him for us – that particular Dad-stance and telling Dad-style Camille and I have known all our lives. The dot is moving – it’s moving fast! – and as it descends something dying in me somersaults into joy. *Dad? Finished?* The dot grows larger, and as it comes closer and closer and Dad himself into focus, I can see that who he is in shoes, or even barefoot by the pool, is not at all who he is on skis. His stance solid, his posture tall, with turns that neither wobble nor fall, Dad skis his way to us free of any giveaway age and as strong and fluid as any Sun Valley punk parading his arrogant youth.

“Dad!” I fairly yelp when he swishes to a stop and flips up his goggles to greet us. “You look *great!* You were *amazing!* You’re the best...the best....” My voice gets strangled by emotion.

“Are you proud of your old Dad?” His breath comes hard and his cheeks look rouged, but his smile, just as I imagined, is huge.

“YES,” gush my sister and I together, at once.

“You know, you just might be the best skier in the whole world!” I manage to squeak through my shyness; it’s a mouse-peep I eke through my tears.

“Horseshit,” says Dad, somehow having heard. He laughs. “I’m just the best skier in Sun Valley.”

NOT-SURFING NEW ZEALAND

My guy Michael is an avid surfer. Crazy, actually. His boards (one long, three short) are festooned like fine art around the house. His wetsuits (a selection) are arranged with reverence in the closet, a rubbery all-sea, all-season wardrobe. His feet are radically callused and his kelp-proof hair buzzed short, all in service of his sport. And this obsesses him body and soul pretty much more than a girl – *this* girl– can get. Has the latest development in our relationship helped?

I am just back from New Zealand, where Michael took me on a 10-day surfing “safari.” Granted, I knew nil about the pursuit before he whooshed me off on this swooningly romantic (I imagined) oceanic odyssey along the North Island’s eastern coast. The purpose of me, I suspected at his surprise invite, was that I would bikini-up and beach-sit – my job to oversee the safety and well-being of his flip-flops while Michael frolicked in the waters of New Zealand’s legendary surf meccas. Ragland. The Coromandel. The Mahia Peninsula. Just the sound of these exotic beaches filled me with thrill, and I couldn’t help but have a head full o’ tropical visions. There we’d be, Michael and I, strolling hand-in-hand along the sand, laughing in our moonlit midnight skinny dips. Not exactly what could be called an “item,” our tentative, mincing relationship would be goosed forward, closer, by the island’s balmy beauty. Well, I’m home. And really, how could I have known?

So, here we are, screaming out of Auckland in our rental campervan. Michael’s boards (one long, one short) joyride along. We are no more than 53 minutes off our 13-

hour flight from San Francisco. It is 5:00 a.m. New Zealand time, dead-of-night dark, and already my Kahuna is officially dressed for his baptism in the local waters, that is to say, naked but for some boardshorts. This is his absolute *favorite* outfit. Come dawn and now miles from Auckland, the scenery is heart-stopping. Volcanic, river-swept, desolate: Here in New Zealand the descriptive “pristine” isn’t kidding. Wild, clean, and everywhere, the sea, each twist in the road reveals a vista of startling beauty.

We speed north along the Whangaparaoa Peninsula, Michael and I, until we screech up to a beach our guidebook says is called Pikiri. I am almost speechless at the spectacle. It is an arc of flawless white sand fringed in ferns and flowers; it unfurls, I swear, for forever at the edge of a dazzling turquoise-green bay. We are completely alone but for a far off fisherman, who bobs in his boat beyond the frothing breakers.

“Oh!” I manage to squeak. Michael fairly squeals, “Let’s check it out!” We hop from the campervan and the snap of salt air, the smile of the sun, make me giddy. Call me a hopeless romantic, but come on! We have arrived at paradise. We trot onto the beach and Michael, rapt, gazes out to sea. His hands are raised to shield his eyes from the glare and I am not at all sure he is breathing. This is his absolute *favorite* surf-gazing stance.

“All right!” I say. “Here we are, we made it. Have a *great* time!” I of course expect the excited surfer to grab his board and fly into the water, and I cannot wait to be abandoned to my beach towel for hours, nay, days. Curiously, however, Michael simply gazes; he gazes some more. He scans the water left, gazing, and gazing still, he scans the water right. He mutters something – that is, if I’m not mistaken.

“Excuse me?”

“Wind’s onshore,” he mumbles.

Had I been fluent in surfing at the time, I would have understood this as a euphemism for *I’m not going out*. As it is I am clueless as to why we now pop back into the campervan and peel away from Pikiri, fluffing dust along a dirt-and-gravel road that in remote New Zealand is like most of the off-highway byways. “That’ll be a beaut, mate,” the campervan rental agent had said, wishing us happy travels as he handed me the map that navigates our “surfari,” and now it says that up ahead lies Mangawhai Heads. “Good beach and bar breaks” encourages Michael’s surf-guide. Mangawhai Heads is not Goat Island, with its ink black sand and “extremely rocky coastline surf.” And it is not Te Arai Point, with its “good right hand wave, on occasion.” What Mangawhai is, it turns out, is the beach where I get the glimmer that on surfing safari, a girl owes it to herself to keep her expectations pretty much open. Otherwise, she just might find herself hurtling along a gravel road with a head-fog of confusion and a heart that thought it knew – but doesn’t – the man for whom it has chanced a trip to New Zealand in hopes it will be happy. On the road to Mangawhai Heads our campervan did indeed careen into the parking lot of Goat Island. Here, the waters were all sun-shimmery and full of blue maomao fish and bottlenose dolphin. Out we hopped. Jogging over to a desolate dune, Michael assumed the stance while I popped back into the campervan to prep for a nice, long beach flop. I was just winding up my SPF-30 routine when he appeared at the sliding side door.

“Right’s not right,” he said.

Pop he came, back into campervan. We fluffed more dust for some miles and next pulled up to Te Arai Point, stopped, and again hopped out. Beautiful, droopy kowhai trees bright with brilliant yellow flowers – New Zealand’s national bloom – frilled the beach with the sort of foreign-looking flora that said we were far, far from home, California. I had barely inhaled the heady Kowhai scent when I was hustled back into the campervan, so fast I lost a hair clip *and* an earring. “Right’s all right,” Michael said, and gunned the engine. “But a left would be better.” I mean, really. Does this make sense?

And now here we are, perched on a breezy bluff above the beach at Mangawhai Heads. The surf unfurls below in elegant foamy curls that look to me like pure possibility. The solitude is stunning: Just us, the gulls, and the concept dawning that maybe I am the only surfer’s girl in the world who doesn’t get it. When will there be some *surfing* in this surfing safari, I want to whine, but don’t dare. If it’s one thing about which this passionate traveler is clear, it’s that one doesn’t want to be the Gidget who isn’t considered when surf trips to Fiji or Indonesia arise. I look over at my “dude,” in the parlance, and surreptitiously inspect him for signs of funk that all our driving around and beach browsing has not yet resulted in a surf. We have traveled 808,405 miles to practically the end of planet Earth, after all; the beaches so far we have seen have looked to me like scenes idyllic for hanging-10, carving-up or showing-off the whatever-it-is that makes big-wave riders, like my guy Michael, experts at their obsession. Besides, I am so hoping to hear it just once from him: the “L” word. *Later, Babelini!* How sweet it would be to have it called to me on the wind as he and his board sprint down the sand to hurl

themselves into the wild-roiling surf. But no funk there, I declare. In fact, the guy seems eerily *fine* with all our hopping-and-popping along the coast; he appears downright pleased with his not-surfing the best of New Zealand. I do a mood check to be sure.

“Are you having fun?” I ask. Michael is frozen in his not-breathing, sea-staring stance. He seems not to have heard me.

“ARE YOU HAVING FUN?”

“Are you kidding?” he says. His jaw drops into *duh* position. “I am absolutely *stoked*.”

“So, then, go!” Teasing, I shove him in the direction of the water. “Surfers surf, no?”

There is a long – very long – comatose moment. Michael then replies, although not in so many words: No.

“Needs south wind,” he pronounces.

Pop we go, back into the campervan. We hop and pop our way north, ever north, and the beaches become a blur, each to me more perfect than the previous. There is Whananaki (“a local favorite,” according to the surfer’s guide), and Mimiwhangata Park (“will have waves when other beaches are flat”). The guidebook tells us that seductive Sandy Bay, on the Tutukaka Coast, is hot hot hot for world-class scuba diving around the offshore marine reserve of Poor Knights Islands. But here when we careen off the road, pull up to the beach and hop out, I am no longer the wide-eyed wave-rider’s friend who in all innocence expects *cowabunga!* to be the next word on the wind. Am I the fool who believes there will be a cry of *surf’s up!*? Not a chance. Surfing must be something like

love, I decide. A careening hunt from beach to beach fueled by a heartload of hope that up ahead lies, at last, The One. The One *what* is a bit of a baffle, but still. Here at Sandy Bay, a small surf beach that venturing north along the Tutukaka Coast kicks off a succession of bays where there's even more opportunity to surf (or not), I ponder the possibility that traveling with a mostly-naked man in relentless pursuit of some elusive...something, could be teaching me something important. Something it would be good to comprehend. Something maybe like love is...is...what, like the perfect wave a phantom forever to seek yet impossible to find? To be swept up and shot along on a surge of powerful thrill – is that a joy reserved for some future time that never, ever arrives – the left never right and the right always...what was it?

Never mind. Sandy Bay offers-up its bliss before us.

“Wow,” I say at first sight of the beach. Faster than the syllable slips my lips, my travel companion goes, you guessed it, pop, back into the campervan. “Michael, come *on*.” This time I do whine. Yet I am astounded when in a wordless rush he does not flip the ignition but instead wiggles into his wetsuit, wrestles a board off the top of the van, waxes it to high stickiness, and runs, *dashes*, to the water's edge.

Between us lies an expanse of powdery sand, lavishly gilded by billions of tiny, perfect shells in the palest of peaches and pinks. The sea shimmers in a rhapsody of aquas and greens. It is my turn now not to breathe. What a gorgeous spot to flop for hours! I load my beach bag – hat, glasses, trashy tell-all – and dance my happy feet to a spot among the shells where, should he catch a wave, which of course he *will*, I duly can rave over Michael's display of surfer-mojo. “Yay! Go *you!*” I'll hoot. The last thing I

see before drifting...dreaming...snoozing the drooling, snore-filled nap of the jet-lagged is Michael crouched in the sand, eyes on the sea, hands raised against the glare; he's gazing.

What is it, 20 minutes, 20 days later? I am jolted awake as a body drops beside me with an *oaf*. "It's closing out," Michael croaks, winded. He isn't even wet.

On surfing safari, like I said, a girl owes it to herself to rework her notions of romance. To be sure, volcanic islands along the Pacific Rim of Fire, like New Zealand, may promise a lot of, well, *heat* in the love a couple ignites or renews on them; the balmy subtropical climate may woo one into a woozy state of *I'm in love!* when to tell the truth it's really a sunbaked befuddlement back of the daze. What does it *mean* that Michael won't surf? I look for the metaphor. Does this portend doom for our relationship, a sign that down the road there will be no *let's just go for it?* As the day grows long, we do more not-surfing around the dazzling Bay of Islands, where the pretty British Colonial town of Russell charms me, all right, but doesn't allay my fear this could, to my heartbreak, happen. The map says we're zooming toward Cape Reinga, New Zealand's northernmost tip. Here, the native Maori believe their spirits leave the island at death. Michael and I in the campervan aren't talking much. I am alone with my foreboding and he focuses dead ahead on the road, which now winds toward the town of Kaitaia and the phenomenon called Ninety Mile Beach. Ninety curvaceous miles of beach it is, indeed – a surfer's Sangri-la where honestly, I'm thinking, there has got to be a spot right enough to entice my reluctant Kahuna into the water. Ninety miles is 90 miles! Surely here a surf will happen. Our campervan careens into Kaitaia, and after out-hopping, per usual,

Michael and I plop down on stools at a beach shack that serves crispy fish-and-chips wrapped in newsprint.

“Good on ya, mate,” says a mostly-naked fellow two stools over – a kindred spirit to Michael, I can tell: his board shorts are so sea-battered and salt-worn they could be no less than his absolute *favorite* outfit. I eat; they chat. And before I know it we are going pop, right into this Kiwi’s campervan for a ride that rockets this way and that until eventually, here I am, flying along the beach in a topless ATV called a “quad.” Up front Michael and his new best friend speak Surf, while in back their boards bounce as high and hard as does my derriere on the wobbly seat. I try not to fall out. The ATV whips to a halt on a remote rock shelf. Little glistening pools hold tide creatures – anemones, starfish and crabs. Surf-spray spits salty drops on my face as the waves, rising higher and higher and huge! curl and crash and foam; they have Michael & Friend, who by now call each other “mate,” in a state that, had I been schooled in surfing at the time, I would have recognized as a euphemism for *I just might die I’m so happy*.

As it is, their conversation assures me that however love is like surfing, or surfing like love, I, for one, am missing some essential understanding that will make this trip to New Zealand, if not the place where Michael and I, I don’t know, *connect*, at least the island of brilliant beauty where maybe I actually learn something. Whether it’s of love, or whether it’s of surfing – either way, it will be so good to progress.

“Right’s all right, mate,” says Michael.

“Right, mate. Left’s right right as well,” says his friend.

“Right.”

“Right.”

And just like that, they’re in the water. With hoots and *wahoo!* they surf the waves breaking left. With joy and *banzai!* they ride the waves curling right. The endless hours of sea-gazing that have led to this moment are no longer pointless, the careening drive from beach to beach far from a waste of time. The surf-guide tells me that Michael’s comatose act on shore is really a crucial part of the sport. For if a surfer is not considering the waves before he or she rides them – how they’re timed, in what configuration they arrive, whether there are offshore currents or riptides – how will they know, really know, the mind and heart, the very soul of the swell that inspires true devotion to the art of moving with it well? If a surfer is not holding in mind the sea’s ways above all that will ask of him his greatest skill and answer his highest desire, how will he recognize when it arrives the surf so special he has no choice but to give himself over completely to the grace of its mystery revealed?

“All riiiiiiiiiiiiight,” comes a cry from the water. I look out in time to see Michael dancing in the surf on a wave so smooth and well-curling and perfect – so right – that even from the beach their dance looks like love.

And at last I get it: never settle for less.

OH GIVE ME A HOME WHERE THE BUFFALO...DON'T
HANG WOEBEGONE ON THE WALL

Outside Yellowstone in Cody, Wyoming, Buffalo Bill's boyhood home is just down the road from the Wagon Wheel, where breakfast is serving up hot: sausage and biscuits and spicy bread pudding, puddled with whiskey sauce. Elk antler chandeliers are dimmed low and a booth of mustached, dusty wranglers in sweat-stained Stetsons smoke like the Marlboro Man's original model would still – that is, if he hadn't lost a lung (or was it his life?) to cancer.

This is cowboy country. Here, there's a rodeo every evening 'round six. Here, cattle guards on freeway onramps keep herds of Hereford from hoofing it onto Highway 90 west and, as I'd suggest, hitching a ride to kinder climes. For it is here that Sioux and Cheyenne once rode hell-for-feathers across the plains packing a good scalping knife, and a popular jingle went like this: *Buffalo Bill, Buffalo Bill/never missed and never will/always aims and shoots to kill/and the company pays his buffalo bill*. Yes, it is here, more to the point, where if you are a creature of the natural world, whether bobcat, barn owl or hawk, you seem sorrier than a boy named Sue. Just ask the huge and quite handsome moose whose head hangs morosely above our booth at the Wagon Wheel. If you're a rambling romantic (like me) who buys heart and soul into the notion that any home, home on the range worth its classic cowboy ballad should be indeed where the buffalo roam and the deer and the antelope play, better brace yourself: It's a mighty frightening prairie out there.

To wit: Seldom is heard a more discouraging word than when our waitress, Sue, skeddaddles on over, bearing a coffee pot, snapping her gum.

“Hi, girls,” she twangs to our traveling party of five as we squeeze cattle-in-a-chute style into the narrow wooden booth, seats as hard as frontier church pews.

“Breakfast is near about over, but we’re serving the lunch special – a buffalo burger with fries.”

Buffalo? gasps Camille, the vegetarian.

“Or I can get you a nice bear burger, with coleslaw...”

Bear? Camille’s six-year-old daughter, Jacqueline, contorts her face into something akin to kiddie horror.

“We also have the local beaver burger,” says Sue, “but that comes with chips.”

Buffalo, bear, beaver? Not since the night before in the charming, one-horse town of Spearfish, South Dakota has a dining decision been so easy. Rocky mountain oysters, also known as fried bull testicles, or *animelles* in the French for those of delicate sensibility, were on the menu along with the sort of otherwordly entrees suitable for a book by frontier chef Ferne Holmes, author of *Easy Recipes for Wild Game and Fish*. She, if you remember, is dispenser of such culinary tips as “keep meat clear of hair and flies.” These were meals to fit right in with her “Stuffed Boar Chops” (Step 1: Find and kill yourself a nice boar) and “Oriental Antelope”; wild west dishes as backwoods distinctive as “Baked Swissed Elk” and moose, which, after you bleed and hang and gut and clean it, is nightmarishly delicious either oven-barbequed in a dirt hole or cubed into goulash.

“Four large salads, three orders of fries and two hot fudge sundaes to split,” we order. Sue seems vexed.

“Where’r you folks *from*?” she asks and snorts a slight snicker at our response, San Francisco. “Now don’t let the Wagon Wheel scare you!” she hoots, getting an obvious guffaw out of our California palates – more attuned to arugula than elk, however well Swissed.

“Only the buffalo burger is the real McCoy. The bear and beaver? Those are just regular ’ol burgers, one with fried onions, the other with cheese.” Camille trades a look of woe with the moose head hung above us, the rest of him presumably long ago gone to goulash. “Oh,” she says, “that’s a relief.”

The west unfurls under our wheels as we drive from the Pine Ridge Oglala Lakota Sioux reservation in eastern South Dakota, past Mt. Rushmore, through Yellowstone National Park, alongside Wyoming’s Grand Tetons and west – west across red-rock Utah, through the vast flats of Nevada, over the Sierras to home. We are on a road trip to acquaint ourselves with cowboy and Indian country: the land of sparrow hawks and alfalfa fields, of Wyatt Earp and Sitting Bull. We are reveling in the wonders of endless empty skies and a Great Plains history that is “painfully, almost despairingly exciting,” in the words of General George A. Custer, who in 1867 thrilled to the bloody, brutal battles of frontier life. It is a road trip rife with reminders of how the west was won: Indian scalps on display at the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, WY; beaver pelts for sale at the Dakota Territory Trading Post in Custer, SD; Crazy Horse carved into the Black Hills

cliffs in the manner of Mt. Rushmore down the road. Packed into every museum and gift shop en route are western art and frontier collectibles – knickknacks and artifacts whose provenance is the trials and triumphs of the west’s earliest, legendary settlers: buffalo hunters, fur traders, railroad developers, outlaws, explorers and, of course, the Native Americans – from Comanche to Apache.

We are here to experience first-hand the same wild west romance that wooed that awe-struck cowboy who by the light of the flickering campfire, to the strum of his lonesome guitar, was moved to croon *Home on the Range* beneath a blanket of brilliant stars: *Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam and the deer and the antelope play.* We have come to see some thrilling frontier fauna – a wild mustang, a bald eagle or an honest to God beaver, at least. We have come in hope of buffalo.

The day after our encounter with Sue and the moose our black Volvo wagon bucks out of Yellowstone National Park. Yippee yi yay! is what we’d hoot if we’d been raised bustin’ broncos. As it is, we are saddle-sore and shaken from bouncing over the bumps and ruts of Yellowstone roads whose “Men at Work” signs and mammoth earth-moving machines strain to keep the breathtaking beauty of the park accessible to all. As promised the scenery is splendid, however, and because fine Old Faithful erupts...well, faithfully, we are only vaguely aware: We see no bear. No bison, no bighorn, no elk (I could cry!). Though Yellowstone literature boasts the 1,200-acre park is home to the greatest concentration of large mammals in America – as in more than 30,000 elk, 3,000 bison, 2,000 mule deer and grizzly by the hundreds – we meet not so much as a marmot.

We park at a scenic overlook and I scan the heady horizon of pristine lakes and vivid pine hills and flowers that grow in wild reckless splendor. The cowboy's tune turns over in my mind: *Oh give me a land where the bright diamond sand flows leisurely down with the stream. Where the graceful white swan glides slowly along like a maid in a heavenly dream.* A swan would be swell, I think to myself. An authentic coyote or how 'bout a hare? Oh, give me a duck, even if it's just one! But no, the bison must be hiding, there are no hare here, and so with its magical animal kingdom as mythical as Oz (is it us?), we leave Yellowstone to press west.

Rolling through Grand Teton National Park, we ooh and ahh over the Tetons themselves – ice-capped, rugged, stunning. An hour outside the park we stop for lunch at a gift shop/café whose Thursday special is chalked on a blackboard propped-up beside – can it be? – yes, a great and mighty grizzly bear, stuffed and stitched-up in full upright and roar position. “Smothered Sheep Steak with Slaw” spells the chalk. On the café walls is an exhibition of animal carcasses arranged as artfully as a Louvre museum mounting of Monet. Placed whisker to snout and paw to antler are heads or better of mule deer, moose, goose, bear, boar, beaver, buffalo, cutthroat trout, prairie dog, red stag, cougar, wood duck, wild turkey and wolf. All but the trout – he being typically inscrutable – wear wide-eyed expressions of stoic disbelief.

“Four large salads, three large fries and two hot fudge sundaes to split,” we order from our server. “Bev” is etched on her nametag. Bev seems perplexed. “You folks don't need to get all *squeamish*,” she says, thick cigarette fumes on her breath. “It's not the *sheep* who's smothered, it's the steak, with gravy.” Bev is sorry we have yet to see

an actual creature of the west in the actual wild. “But,” she says as the dead beaver behind her to the left seems to slit its glass eyes at her in beaverly peevishness. “These fellas on the wall will tell ’ya, life out here isn’t always what you’d call a cabaret. Now, sure I can’t change your mind about some smothered sheep?”

We’re sure.

That evening we roll into Jackson, WY. At the airport on the outskirts six sleek private jets sit pretty in a row. Between here and town are a herd of ranches whose owners, like Hollywood icon Harrison Ford, seem to embrace an aesthetic that’s totally Home on the Range, however *arriviste*. The sprawling, luxurious homes, I can see through brightly lit windows, sport *le tout* in ranch chic: trout-shaped wall sconces; buck antler chandeliers; a Clint Eastwood-style leather duster thrown with nonchalance over a rough-hewn pine loveseat. As we wheel by these plush ponderosas, the crooning cowboy corrals my mind yet again. *Where the air is so pure and the zephyrs so free, and the breezes so balmy and light/Oh, I would not exchange my home on the range for the glittering cities so bright.*

Surely, the wild west romance his tune suggests is more than the contemporary outdoor fun that is a Jackson pride – fly-fishing, trail-riding, river-running, rock climbing, among them. Surely the wonder of the fabled frontier of which he sings is alive and thriving beyond the modern swank that fills the town’s tony shops. There, cowboy hats, hand-tooled boots and belt buckles of serious silver wink *come hither* at visiting rhinestone wranglers – those passers-through who mostly holster VISAs and who are saddled-up into galloping Range Rovers. Surely, in short, the deer and antelope of yore

are found at play where the range in its natural glory remains? I long to bet my fantasy on it.

We scoot into one upscale shop, the High Country Accents furniture store, and *git along little dogies!* There, draped over the frame of a \$9,000 juniper and deer-hide armchair with all the sexy languor of a bikini-clad model over a hotrod in *Muscle Mustangs* magazine is a mountain lion. Deader than a doornail and real, the lion looks only slightly less disheartened with its astonishing fate than the equally real grizzly and black bear heads (no kidding) that are attached to two corners of an expensive executive desk, also for sale.

This design trend of turning dearly departed creatures into decorative home and office *objets* – dubbed “Furry-Dead-Thingism” by *Outside* magazine – may be so hot it’s “caught on like bellbottoms,” according to Thea Marx, director of the annual Western Design Conference. But when Jacqueline accidentally backs into the mountain lion chair and screams in that piercing shriek particular to skittish six-year-olds, I do, too, inside.

For once upon a time in the west, before white man, there were perhaps 70 million buffalo roaming the plains, elk in abundance, and cougars and bears that weren’t desks and chairs. Today, suggestions abound that deer and antelope are not home, home on the range as much as trophies to stuff and tack up. Surely today this has changed, but even the “World’s Largest Elk Antler Arch” flaunts the theme. A gawk-inspiring awe that rises 18 feet over Main Street in Afton, WY, this collection of 3,011-odd antlers is said to be worth over \$300,000 due to their value in Asia as an aphrodisiac. How much sexier they would be, it strikes me, seen adorning the elk from which they were shorn.

It's the next day when we buck our way west to Salt Lake City (more road construction). From there it's a nonstop, straight shot across Nevada, through California's Donner Pass, across the Sacramento valley to San Francisco. Once I am home, home, far from the range where no moose hang woebegone on the wall and where burgers are "garden" not bear, I am glad. Still, of a night when the moon is bright and the flickering fire takes my mind to that lonesome prairie where the cowboy is crooning, I am filled with the wild wonder of the ageless, romantic west, and I silently sing along: *How often at night when the heavens are bright/from the light of the glittering stars/have I stood there amazed and asked as I gazed/if their glory exceeds that of ours.*

And while I can't explain our unusual trip, where bobcat and barn owl alike stayed perplexedly out of sight, I like to think it's because they are now smart enough to refuse the fate of becoming a sad, furry bit of ranch chic. Come the chorus, I'll improvise my own lyric twist: *Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam, I'll sing, not serve where a salad or Cezanne will do.* Only then will seldom be heard a discouraging word (from me), and the skies won't seem cloudy at all.

A SEACLIFF SERENADE

Love must be a light as much as it is a flame.

Henry David Thoreau

He was 15, or so he lied. I, too, was 15 (the truth). And the night I met 13-year-old Michael B. around a driftwood fire on Seacliff Beach was immense: it meant I was no longer romantically backward. Finally, like all my junior high school friends had already, it was my turn to fall in love for the first time, and Michael flipped me into the abyss with his eyes of Aegean Sea blue and manner as shy as mine.

That was 35 years ago.

Today, the details of my first romance, the magic of my first love, live in my mind and heart as a seaside serendipity of sun, sand, surf and stars. Seacliff Beach is where my first boyfriend and I swam and splashed and laughed: my first kiss, my first beer, my first French kiss – all with Michael B. – all at Seacliff Beach.

Now, a lifetime later, I suspect the beach is bewitched. I mean, really, what can Seacliff be thinking? The California crescent of shore where dolphins frolic, seabirds play, and sun, sand and stars smile down on a beautiful central coast – well, it seems the beach is bringing back to me the love I knew at 15. And it is not simply the same flush of thrill, or the rush of something new, unexpected or immense. It is, as well, the boy himself, his Aegean Sea eyes unchanged in all this time.

Not that he washed up with the tide, although he might have for all my surprise. But just last week as I walked the beach, there he was: my first love, running along the

sand. And to see him, these 35 years' worth of ex-relationships later, is to realize with an uncomfortable start, I hardly have evolved at all.

I confess, not since my teenage romance have I managed to swim and splash and laugh in the ocean surf with the same free and easy abandon that ran like the wind through the me of 15. And let's be honest: In my three and a half decades of travel to other beaches on a handful of continents, not a single one has offered so much as a harmless flirtation, much less an enjoyable fling, far less a serious love.

But the beach that is the site of my teenage triumph, where I fell in love during a sunburned summer of surfing and swimming and fun – I think it is up to something.

Michael is newly divorced (the truth). At age 51, I am starting over. That's a lie. At age 51 *and a half*, and fresh from a long romance gone wrong, I, too, am beginning again. So, tripping upon my first love at this precise moment in time on the very sand where magic once upon whirled me in a dance of freshly awakened desire, a dance that tossed me up, up into the realm where all feels possible – well, it does seem slightly suspect. Early this evening I walked the beach from the family house to which after years away I have returned, unsure of where the life I play out next will be – this city or that? In silence I converse with the very same sun, sand and sea that long ago held so much promise for the clueless me of 15. *Come now, Seacliff, out with it*, I wonder to myself. *Is bringing me Michael your sly, wily way of matchmaking – again?* The surf speaks not, the birds keep mum.

Returning to Seacliff now, what feels like a lifetime later, I find its enchantment remains – made all the more dazzling by my travels. No sands of San Sebastian or

Cannes seem as clean, no bay of L.A. or Maine or Spain so unique. Mornings when the porpoises leap and evenings when the pelicans feed, I feel there is no better beach in the world for revealing how greatly I'm blessed – blessed not only to revel again in the outdoor joy that is Seacliff's gift to all who love a beautiful beach, but blessed also by the far-fetched idea – dare I name it hope? – that the place may have plans for me, plans for something beyond my dreams to which, given my iffy romantic history, I would think, *No way!*

Mystery. Tales of true love are thick with it. Dashed dreams, apparent loss, and then, at the bleakest eleventh hour, a happy – even miraculous – reconciliation. It is all so sappy, granted, but oh-so-thrillingly romantic! The story is a truth (or lie) I like. So I ask the all-seeing stars that with the faintest sparkle bid sweet dreams to the retiring sun, what is up with me and my first love? The winking firmament says less than Seacliff itself, though I admit the beach is taunting me with hints of what may yet be for Michael and me. On any day this is what I see: laughing couples hand in hand who stroll the beach at sunset; walkers and their romping dogs who frolic in the surf at dawn. Sunbathers, swimmers, fishers – the beach by light is peopled by the relaxed, the happy, the smiling. By night the otters and sea lions and, when the month is right, whales, add to the sea their wonder. Looks to me like a love fest, all right. Hmm.

It would be a lie to say the togetherness that Michael and I share again is not an exact replay of our high school relationship. Never mind the 35-year absence. When I splash and laugh and swim with – and kiss – the teenage boy who, at 49 seems strangely unchanged, no time has passed. He's worldlier, perhaps, more traveled; that he has his

driver's license now only adds to all the appeal he held for me at 13. The truth: Even decades lived apart, often at opposite ends of the earth (me: Paris; Michael: New Zealand) compact into minutes when the free, easy fun once shared with someone again turns up – undiluted, undiminished, undimmed. Inexplicable. Or is it a trick of the miraculous? My dear Seacliff, do tell! In my silent conversation, I ask the beach to tell its secret. But the still-warm sand stays silent and the prancing surf rolls in – without a word.

When Michael joins me we build a driftwood fire, he and I, and talk of nothing. We say simply everything in the fun it is to be at this beach together again after 35 years of...whatever. We look over the water to the lights of a far-away pier. Suddenly – and this is the truth – porpoises leap from the water, one and then another. Sandpipers scurry, pelicans swoop, and from off somewhere a mockingbird sings. The beach rolls in ecstasy around us, and at a strangely synchronized time, from points practically a planet apart (me: San Francisco; Michael: Indonesia), my first love and I both are drawn back to the same crescent of sea where a love that was new and young arrived once before. Could this be a love not done with us? I suspect it is only the beach that knows.

The sky streaks a palette of pinks as the sun sinks behind the horizon. The fog rushes in as if late for a date with destiny. It seems as eager to get back to this beach as weeks ago I was – Michael, too – both of us having felt some mysterious pull neither he nor I, can explain. Snug by our driftwood fire, my first love and I revel in the moment – repeated. You rascal, Seacliff: the beach where magic happens.

SUBMITTING TO SHASTA

*Shasta! Oh Mount Shasta!
What secrets do you hide
What dwells within that heart of yours
What Light does there abide?...
What Knowledge do you guard so well
From those who seek too bold?...*

Godfre Ray King (1878-1939)

We are four on a rope on the slope. Said like that there's a certain poetic appeal to our ordeal. We are four on a rope – without hope? No, no; we have hope all right, hope born weeks ago when we, eager, decided to climb the 14,179-foot strato-volcano known as California's Mt. Shasta. But here it comes: the rock the size of a Chevy Suburban. It rockets off a colossal shale outcrop directly above us, and with an eerie crack it crashes once, now twice on the steep, snow slope to which we cling for dear life with crampons. A searing flash of fear slices into me and I wonder if perhaps such hope is nothing more than our mistake. Our miserable mistake. Spinning, the boulder picks up sickening speed; it plunges, it charges, it *lunges* now dead ahead toward Camille, who stands frozen as the rock bears down. The advancing hulk seems to have decided: she, yes she, has been chosen its victim – the sacrifice expected for our conceit. Stricken with shock I watch the rock fall and in an instant know: this mountain of terrible beauty, where a dazzle of glacial seductions entice so many climbers to come prove their mojo as its match, may allow her slopes to be scaled and her summit won, but in the end? Shasta will not be conquered.

I am no mountaineer. Let Jon Krakauer climb *Into Thin Air* up Everest to taunt death all he wants. Let Simon Yates, broken-boned and bloody, disappear down a

crevasse high in the Peruvian Andes; let *him* endure an ordeal arguably worse than death: the four harrowing days he crawled inch-by-inch through fear and pain and desolation to safety. The avalanches on K2, the falls off Denali, the high altitude cerebral edema enjoyed in the “death zone” above 23,000 feet – no, thank you. Sunny spring skiing at a chi-chi resort like Sun Valley? My speed. Still, when my sister Camille and our friend Mark, both avid climbers, conspired to summit Shasta in a three-day adventure that promised (they promised) terrific hiking, delightful camping and a wonderful excuse to get out in the wild for fresh air and fun, I would not be left behind. Neither would Camille’s 16-year-old son, Gabriel. And so we prepped.

Shasta, after all, is hardly Everest. Only the second highest peak in the Cascade Range, and the fifth tallest in California, hundreds of ambitious hikers a year scale its eight glaciers without too much to-do, despite the occasional bout of altitude sickness or not-too-serious fall. Crevasses and avalanches and a nose or toes lost to frostbite? This is not the stuff of Shasta. And so it was with excited anticipation I did what all actual mountaineers surely do: I shopped. Gotta gear up properly went Mark’s and Camille’s counsel. Boots, helmet, ice axe, crampons – these and other accoutrements of climbing, including a harness with which to attach myself to my “team” via rope, were on the list, as was an amped-up workout schedule of running and yoga and biking and weights. I mean, if no less a mountain man than John Muir can run into trouble on the mountain the first Spanish explorers of 1808 christened *Jesus Maria*, I wanted to be sure I wouldn’t be calling on either to save me from some unwelcome hell. It was during one of Muir’s three Shasta climbs in 1874-75 that he got trapped on the summit by a storm. He

survived only by warming himself in the mud of the hot sulfur springs that bubbled near the peak. Lesson learned, Mr. Muir: I was not going to be caught without a proper mountaineering outfit, much less body, so help me Jesus Maria.

* * *

'Ho, 'ho, yo!
Yo!, 'ho, yo!

The lyrics of Mark's gansta rap music, such as they are, boom in the car as we pull in to the parking lot at Shasta's base. Rather than climb the popular, easiest and typically crowded Avalanche Gulch route, we plan to summit via the less-publicized and more challenging Hotlum/Boland Ridge route on the mountain's northwestern side – the glacial route, it turns out this late July day, of not one other soul. I gaze up at the glacier that awaits us, sun-sparkled and still. In the distance it looks none too steep and far from foreboding. Surely here there will be no falling into the void like can happen on Annapurna, and with today's flawless azure sky, certainly no lightning strikes are expected to doom us like they do sometimes the climbers of Kilimanjaro. Doable, I decide. That will be *our* Shasta. After much fussing, we shoulder our massive packs and I stagger under the weight of the three-days' worth of four-course meals, six-weeks' stash of survival snacks (what if we get lost?), plus eight changes of clothes I simply have to have, but no matter: we will shuck the tent and all cooking paraphernalia, at least, once we establish "base camp." So the crushing burden of mostly frivolous things will slow and cripple me for only a couple of hours. Never mind the sweaty and strenuous six it actually takes to reach the site of our first night's camp: a flat-ish rock plateau 2,700 feet up that's tailor-made for our tent. The hike is so lovely we hardly notice the time. It

winds through luscious alpine meadow, pine-scented forest, rising slopes of scree. 'Ho, 'ho, yo, I intone to myself with each footfall, an odd yet rhythmic mantra that adopts me as I stagger and step, Yo, 'ho, yo.

Step after step, higher and higher we rise up Shasta's side. We're climbing! I realize at some fresh vista where the view of the green, leafy lowlands we're leaving is keen and my joy, too, rises. Shasta seems to be coddling us along, her weather perfect, her mountain breeze soft; her stars now spangle the darkening sky in a splendor so stunning it is almost enough to swerve my worry away from the hike's first fierce bite of surprise. Almost. A short, nearly vertical slope of broken shale suddenly appears between us and the rock plateau.

"Uh-oh," says Camille.

"Whoa," gasps Mark.

"No way," goes Gabriel.

Yo...oh...no! I intone and then stop to behold the specter: a climb certain to test our guts if not our luck. "Yikes, that sure looks steep and (gulp) crumbly."

But we do it. And Shasta helps. We crawl and claw, crab fashion, up the sliding falling wobbly shale, our unwieldy packs threatening at every step to throw us off balance and send us crashing head over heels back down from whence we've come. It is said by legend that Shasta harbors a secret city within her core, a city of jeweled corridors home to a mystical brotherhood descended from mythical Lemuria. I hope the brothers can't hear my panic-tinged yelps as I crawl and claw, and I hope the purity of Lemuria will be none the worse for Mark's curses as he does, too: *Damnyoudamnyoudamnyou*.

But Shasta does not pitch us off, neither does she nauseate us with her altitude-gain or conjure a wind so cruel it whips us into regretting our first success. In fact, upon the plateau the wind is kind in which we, too pooped to eat, hurriedly pitch our tent – so hurriedly that our first night on the mountain is spent sleeping with sharp rocks as pillows and poised at an unnatural angle. Shasta doesn't deign to freeze us as we lie snoring side by side, stuffiness filling our sinuses positioned down-slope from our feet. Instead sweet dreams of Lemuria – is it beautiful? are the brothers handsome and, I don't know, hot? – are borne to me on the night's soft flutter of a breeze.

* * *

It's 1:30 a.m. when Camille steps on my head to exit the tent. "Sorry," she whispers. "It's time." In the silence and chill of the dawn yet far off, we knock about blindly to rig ourselves up for "summit day." The mountain's peak lies uncountable hours ahead, so dressing in harness, helmet and headlamp, we rope together, man our ice axes and head up. Step by slow, deliberate step we make our silent way from scree to snow, climbing ever and ever higher. As I rise and the slope steepens, a mild concern steals in. Trussed up as I am as part of a team, how will I maneuver the...well, the bathroom breaks? Pull the rope left and my fellow climbers follow. Ducking with discretion behind the right rock? A problem. It will be the least of them. As we climb the sky brightens in a brilliant rhapsody of roses and golds, and Shasta continues to beckon us toward her summit. We are lured higher and higher by her lack of difficulty, and we are beguiled ever onward by her apparent promise of a conquest easily achieved. I mean, Camille, Mark, Gabriel and I, we all feel great! We step and sweat and greet the

rising sun without so much as the slightest high-altitude headache. *'Ho, 'ho, yo.* Hour upon hour I place my crampon into each clear footprint Camille, ahead of me on the rope, stamps into the soft glacier snow, *yo 'ho yo.* Ten thousand feet, 11,000, 12 – at each elevation the volcano dormant since 1786 is proving itself a gentle soul free of cliffs or crags or crevasses; it offers no wretched hazards like ice to avoid. Possibly the New Agers and old legends are right. Possibly Shasta really is a sacred site where a powerful energy vortex calls to believers like those who, in the 1980s, gathered here for a “worldwide harmonic convergence.” I am definitely harmonically converging with Shasta’s happy absence of killer ice storms like those found on Mr. Ranier; I am blissing over its freedom from the deadly blizzards of Mt. Blanc. This mountain’s sweet terrain and sunny-day disposition make our climb feel graced by...here I’ll say it: grace. In fact, when we reach the summit – all 14, 179 feet of it – I am as elated as any real mountaineer dating back to Otzi the iceman. While his 5,300-year-old remains were found high in the Alps in 1991, thus making him surely the world’s first summit junkie, my very alive body thrills to the view (spectacular), the feat (we did it!) and the fact that Shasta has been so amenable to our success.

“Smile!” says the stranger we ask to snap our official summit photo. And we do, well-pleased with ourselves. We are oblivious.

* * *

I wonder if Petrarch, the 14th century Italian poet whose mountaineering exploits endeared him to many as the father of Alpinism, ever met a descent he didn’t like. The smallest slip on a chip of ice, the merest misstep on a piece of unsteady scree – these and

other tiny climbing mishaps are all it takes to turn a perfect day into a perfect fright. And for Camille, Mark, Gabriel and I, the fright begins on a soft-snow slope that climbing up seemed benign but stepping down is – strangely – appallingly steep. Down and down it shoots to an insanity of rocks hundreds of feet below. How did we not see these on the way up? Its hold on *our* feet is tenuous. My overworked crampons cling to the slope with as much shaky strength as remains in my legs after our nearly 10-hour ascent. It isn't a lot. We are traversing the slope with prudence for Camille and Mark, experienced, know the downside of climbing foolishness. I am the caboose on the rope – last – and moving with innocent confidence. '*Ho, 'ho, yo*, I step. And slip. My foot slips and I sit. I think nothing of it. *I'll just get up*, goes my thought. But to my surprise I find I can't. Instead, I am sliding. Oh-so-slowly, but picking up speed, I am sliding – sliding with no way to stop, sliding with nothing to grab, sliding then spinning and thinking nothing but, *Oh!* Then: a jerk. The rope at my waist pulls taut and upside down, I stop. A little dazed I look up the slope to see Gabriel with his ice axe dug into the snow and his body flung over it to anchor its hold.

“Way to go, Gabe!” cheers Mark, impressed with the boy's successful climbing “arrest.” Quickly, I am back on my feet and in the team's single-file line, but with an awakened jittery sense that perhaps we are not as safe as all this time we've supposed. Step by (more careful) step, we zig-zag our way down the slope and then: Just like that, Gabriel is off his feet sliding and I feel my rope pull hard. My face hits the snow and it's the two of us now, tumbling, sliding, spinning, picking up speed. Gabriel cries out but I am too stunned to utter even *oh!* Flailing, I try to grab what I can; there is nothing. I

have no clue what to do with my axe because, like I say, I am no mountaineer. We slide, we spin, we pick up speed and it is forever, or maybe mere seconds, but I feel it: the jerk. Suddenly, I stop. Below me I see Gabriel has, too. My heart hammers, my face burns – the fear, the fear – but I glance up the slope and see Mark kneeling as if beseeching Jesus Maria. He has thrust his axe into the snow beneath him in classic “team arrest” fashion and stopped us all from falling down, down, tragically down to the murderous crags below. Camille hoots wildly in approval.

“You did it! Go you! Oh, my God, that was *great*,” she hoots. Mark just kneels, his attitude prayerful; his silence speaks for us all: *Thank you*. Gabriel, shaking, gathers his wits and I do, too, and we each reattach crampons come loose, readjust glasses askew, and ease back into single-file on the rope. The confusion of rocks at slope’s bottom seems now to issue a dare and the sun-sopped field of snow we have yet to cross feels newly treacherous, a peril for which we are unprepared. Suddenly, our footing is not sure and the slope is fraught with who knows what next? Step by step, each now agonizingly deliberate, we again get moving. *’Ho, ’ho, yo*, I squeak and notice I am intensely, *life-and-deathly* focused on the right here, right now. Shasta is showing me something important, something it would be good to know. Is it that the mountain cannot be trusted? That it is not in the least what it seems? Easy. Neither to know nor to predict, Shasta tells me it’s got its secrets, and safety’s just another word for something I don’t own.

Especially now. “Mom!!” Gabriel screams. “Rock!!” And here it comes. The boulder that shoots off the outcrop above us seems ferocious in its intent. It bears down

on Camille, faster and faster it rolls. If she runs right she will pull us all off our feet and into a sure sliding fall. If she stands still the rock will slam into her and drag the rope – with us – to some ill-defined doom that I, right now, am too, too stunned and confused to foresee. My eyes go blurry with fright and then: my sister with a jolt rockets left as Mark yells “Go!!” – her two or three steps fired by something unearthly in its potential for speed. Via angel or adrenaline, I’ve never seen anyone move as fast as Camille. The rock whizzes past by mere inches and crashes its wretched way down the slope. Its whine carries on the wind; its moan is a heavy thud on the snow. Later she says she felt its breath, the life of Shasta thriving.

* * *

Sixteen hours, 30 minutes and however many seconds it takes to strip off the gear – pack, helmet, harness, rope – and collapse in the tent in a delirium of both achievement and relief becomes the official time of our summit. We four on the rope make it back to base camp safely, sanely, and after the fun of some high-speed glissading that goosed up our moods. Yet even as I dropped to my bottom to slide sled-like and laughing down the glacier’s lower slopes, I felt somehow that Shasta was allowing me the thrill only because...well, because. In her wild caprice, in her willfulness almost wanton, the merry moment might have transformed just like that into one altogether not so, with the mountain itself deciding how it would go. A hidden crevasse that yawns open, a seemingly solid rock shelf that gives way, any sudden and unexpected whim can, indeed, catch us unaware, with only Shasta herself in on the understanding.

Still, the satisfaction is sweet for Camille, Mark, Gabriel and I, snug in the tent our final night on the mountain before we hike out and rejoice in the sight of the car. We did it! We came, we climbed, we...survived. We had tons of fun, in fact. The evening air seems more lusciously scented, with our success, and the stars that shyly show themselves with the setting sun wink especially bright. Is it my pride in our awesome accomplishment that makes Shasta's charms seem so delicious, now that all danger has passed and we are free to feel so pumped-up with triumph? A breeze rouses itself to whisper *good job* and clouds, just a few, gather to tell us, *you guys are hot*. Happy, sore and exhausted, I drift off to sleep to the lullaby of the melting glacier snow that rushes bubbling down the mountain in a nearby stream of soothing music. Back to those handsome Lemurians...

* * *

It is 10:15 p.m. when the first flash of light ignites the dark and the low rumble of – what? – jolts me bolt upright. “Oh my God,” moans Camille. “Oh. My. God.” The flashes come fast now and, too, the booms – explosions that shake us from our sleep with a slap of shock. Lightning! Thunder! Yes, thunder and lightning and now, the rain, buckets of it, and hail, hail that hammers the tent and drowns our gear and our clothes outside. The bitter wind joins in with its ire – all arrived out of nowhere.

“Camille?” I croak from deep within the cocoon of my sleeping bag, now pulled over my head to hide me from the truth of our predicament. “Is this tent waterproof?” Gabriel croaks his own, *oh, great*, from the depths of his bag. “No,” she says in a tone so

bleak I swear we're in for it now. *No.* And the soul of Shasta opens to us, the enigma we take home.

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