

From: *The Stranger is Me: Journeys and Self-Discoveries*, ©2000, James A. Clapp, Ph.D.

II. 1

THE LADIES OF PARIS

With its earthbound ungainly movements the huge airplane swings about in the taxiway, its klieg-bright lights illuminating the insignias and logos of airlines from exotic places, airlines that I didn't even know existed, some from places that seemed too remote to even have airlines. But I am bound for a familiar destination.

The international airport is otherworldly at night. Its landscape blinks and winks with low-set colored lights. Huge airliners slip in and out of the *chiaroscuro* of glare and gloom. In the narrow perspective of the plane's window they lay in multiple exposures in its triple glazing. Muffled roars and subtle seismic sensations from the pounding of the huge jets and churned air mingle with the hissing vents of the cabin. In the cabin forward there are snatches of conversation, nervous giggles. Two flight attendants are comparing bargains they found in the Plaka in Athens last week, as though the Plaka were a suburban mall just down the road in Suffolk County.

My Boeing 747 nudges itself out toward the runway, engines hinting at their potency with only a fraction of their thrust. Wings flex, seeming anxious to bite into the air that once again, miraculously, incredibly, will lift this giant contraption, and me, aloft, and away, to Paris.

So say my scribbled notes that evening departing JFK in January 1989, when the TWA 800 flight I was on was just another flight number, not a cipher that would etch itself into so many memories seven years later. That night in '89 TWA 800 was very light. I remember thinking that I would have my choice of center row seats to stretch out to my full length. I would sleep again in the stratosphere, but first I would have to remind the flight attendant to wake me for any meal services. I would arrive in Paris early on a Sunday, with limited choices for breakfast.

TWA 800. Seven years later I still had my ticket stub, bought with frequent flier miles, compulsive ticket hoarder that I am. When I heard of its horrible fate in the Summer of 1996, exploding over southeastern Long Island in a dusky sky with 230 aboard, something clicked.

They were headed, like me, for Paris/DeGaulle. They were doubtless lured by one of the world's most alluring cities, and so was I. They were full of anticipation, fears, and

edgy expectancy, and so was I. And like them I had the faint, repressed, doubt that I might never see Paris in the next morning's light. But I did.

But then, in 1989, the auspiciousness of the *Bicentenaire* of the French Revolution notwithstanding, I had no inkling of future tragedies. I had had my own personal tragedy recently enough, and I was self-absorbed, introspective, and more than a little anxious about the assignment to which I had committed myself.

Behind me in California remained a girlfriend in a fraying relationship. I was unable to discern whether I was running toward, or away, from something, or someone . . . even that wasn't clear. I had disrupted a relatively routine and pleasant existence teaching, writing and broadcasting, had neglected getting my French in shape for living and working, not just touring, Paris, and I was going to be living for a time with a complete stranger. There wasn't a chance in hell that I was going to be able to quit smoking, not in this frame of mind, and not in the land where meal courses are spread out to allow leisurely drags on a *Gauloise* or *Gitane*.

I had traveled a good bit before this and come to the conclusion that travelers are usually making existential, as well as geographic journeys. Being the "stranger" and placing ourselves in the unfamiliar might help in some way, to some better understanding not just of who "they" are, but who "I" am. I had been feeling the portent of such revelations well before I boarded this flight.

The plane was so light the flight attendant told me I could smoke in my 'non-smoking' seat; it wouldn't bother the four other passengers scattered in the entire aft coach cabin. It helped to settle my nerves, and I began making notes when we reached cruising altitude. The compulsive notebook filler in me didn't want to forget any *aperçu* that might emerge in the vortex of my emotions. I could tell from the notes that something was gnawing at my mind; that feelings I'd kept bound and gagged for some time saw an advantage to assert themselves.

TWA 800 dropped through the tenebrous Paris ceiling in the early morning. DeGaulle airport was almost deserted, and the small number of passengers from my flight didn't bring much life into it as we made our silent, stiff-limbed way toward Passport Control. My passport and visa were given perfunctory notice by an impassive customs officer still smelling of *savon de lilac* from her morning shower. Bob was waiting for me at the TWA counter by the time I had retrieved my baggage.

Paris was in a drizzle, and it was cold and uninviting; not untypical for January. Bob had borrowed a friend's car and cursed not being able to find the wiper switch, and then the exit. It was damn nice of him to arise at 5 AM to drive across most of Paris to pick up a guy he had only spoken to on the phone a couple of times.

Bob is an Irish New Yorker who has been in Paris since the early 1960s, teaching Political Science at the University of Paris. He married a French woman and has a daughter by her; but he is still very much a New Yorker, and, politically, well enough to the 'left' that, coming from Reagan-Bush America, we could condole together over the state of our homeland.

Much of his politics I learned later over lunches. Bob was most “French” gastronomically. I could share the wines and cheeses with him, but not the *andouillettes* that were little more than coarse and scarcely-cooked sausages with an aroma of putrefaction. “An acquired taste,” he said when I politely refused. We talked politics in bars and cafés. It was an unavoidable topic; France was about to celebrate its *Bicentenaire* of the French Revolution, and Eastern Europe was fracturing like an ice floe in Spring. 1989 promised to be a year of discovery for a lot of people.

But that morning coming in from the airport my mind was on anything but politics.

We entered more familiar parts of Paris, Paris *intra muros*, the city inside the Boulevard Periphique, postcard Paris. Bob meandered a bit, seeking the best route to the 15th Arrondissement, where the woman I call “Madame M” lived. But Bob was a bus and Metro guy, glad that the traffic at this hour was almost non-existent. The familiar high landmarks of central Paris began to emerge from the gloom and mist, the splendid steel lace of the Tour Eiffel, and the repulsive, sky-blotting Tour Montparnasse, the first accentuating the fact that the city’s beauty owed much to its not having succumbed to the ‘international style’ of architecture, the second announcing how the French could screw it all up.

Soon we turned into another of the Paris uglification projects, the expressway that brutally walls off any pedestrian access to the river. Years later Princess Diana would be crushed to death in one of its tunnels.

The 15th is on the Left Bank and Bob turned left after crossing the Pont Neuf at the tip of the Ile de la Cité, and then turned left again along the river bank. It was the wrong direction, but, for me, in a more profound way. The one building I did not want to see that morning filled the windshield. In the mist loomed the towers of Notre Dame de Paris. I don’t recall the navigational question Bob was asking me at the time, only that my response caught in my throat.

I had seen Notre Dame a few times since Patty died, but always at the busiest times, and in the company and distraction of members of my tour groups. But on this dreary, lonely morning it was as unwelcome *memento mori*.



Patty

Patty and I had traveled together for several years, sometimes on questionable modes of conveyance. Before another trip in 1980 we decided that, having two daughters, it would be a good idea to prepare a will. We secured the services of an attorney. When we got to the end of the rather grim process of deciding who gets what, etc., the lawyer inquired about any wishes we might have pertaining to, in his words, the “disposition” or our “remains.” Other euphemisms such as “pre-decease” brought to mind Waugh’s satire, *The Loved One*.

We smiled at each other nervously, and while I had no doubt that I would “pre-decease” my wife, I was taken aback when she ‘pre-responded’ me by looking me directly in the eye and announcing: “I want you to take my ashes to Paris and release them into the wind from one of the towers of Notre Dame.”

Patty loved Paris passionately, so I had to consider that she wasn’t joking. She said it with such conviction.

“You . . . I mean *I*, can’t do that!” I declared.

“Why not?” she said calmly.

“Because you’re Catholic, that’s why.”

“So’s Notre Dame.”

The lawyer, a rather formal sort, look a little puzzled at this exchange.

“I mean. . . the ashes . . . cremation, you know, the Church doesn’t allow it, does it?” I protested, realizing that this was coming out of a mouth that hadn’t had a eucharistic wafer in it for nearly twenty years, and a mind that had ignored any changes in Roman Catholic liturgy and dogma.

“So?”

She was right; neither of us had taken the Church's views on much of any thing into account for years. Why now? Moreover, I was now beginning to believe that she had thought about the matter before this, and it was her "remains" that were being "disposed".

The lawyer interjected: "there might be an ordinance prohibiting releasing ashes from a public building, and . . ."

Patty shifted her gaze from me to him under her signature slow blink. The lawyer just let the last of his legalistic thought drift away.

"Well I won't be able to do it anyway," I said confidently. Another slow blink and the gaze was back on me. "Because you will already have released *my* ashes from, a . . . a . . ., the dome of St. Peter's. No, make that over the Forum; it's more secular." I was fumbling, and her smile said she knew it.

"There, it's settled then? The lawyer asked, reaching for the papers. He was getting a flat rate for the will, not "billable hours".

It didn't feel all that settled to me, but in a few minutes we were off, very much alive with the anticipation of travel, to pick up our air tickets. We kidded about it getting on the elevator: "Please, you *pre-elevate* first. "No, you may *pre-descend* me." That grim stuff was all way in the future.

So much for my actuarial abilities. Within three years, at forty-three, and in the flower of her artistic talents, Patty was mortally ill. When she died little more than a year after the diagnosis, the terms of "disposition" were buried under the shock and sadness. That discussion in the lawyer's office didn't come back to me until well after she was at rest in her grave, aptly, I like to think, under the landing flight path to the San Diego Airport. Over the years it has been a place of comfort and solace to me that my first traveling companion is always the first to welcome me home as my plane descends into Lindbergh Airport. But each time there is the haunting little doubt that my first lady of Paris really did want to drift away over the *Île de la Cité*.

I had no premonition be the reason the misted façade of Notre Dame struck with such unanticipated emotional power that morning of my arrival. That, and my fatigue, or some unmet dimension of grief, my eyes began to water and my voice caught in my throat. I felt queasy and weak. I forced a return to some composure as we turned south into Blvd. St. Michel, away from one lady, toward the *Quinzieme*, and another lady of Paris.

Madame M

Madame M lived in a modestly-sized apartment in a small, short street in the 15th Arrondissement. It took a little searching to find it, but the time allowed me to regain some composure. I didn't want to make a poor first impression on a person with whom I had had the exchange of only two brief and businesslike letters.

Even in these letters, however, I had gained the impression that Madame M was a formidable person. I had learned that she "took in academic-types" from the friend of a colleague and knew only that she was English, a good cook, and as the French would

express it “had 93 years”! Most important, her rates and terms were more than reasonable.

After my ride to the *quatrieme etage* in a phone booth-sized elevator she greeted me with a warm formality. Standing ramrod straight, and nearly my height, she offered a firm handshake and a *bienvenue*. Then with no more ceremony she told me that I must certainly be fatigued from my long trip, directed me straight to my room at the rear of the apartment and said she would make tea after I had a rest. Like an obedient little ‘grandson’ I complied with her instructions, noting that they were slightly imperative as well as maternal.

And like a little boy, when I closed the door to my room, kicked off my shoes, and fell back on the bed I felt a couple of tears running from the corners of my eyes down into my ears. Not being a weepy person I was a bit surprised. But I was physically exhausted, my girlfriend was six thousand miles away and headed further as far as our relationship was concerned, I was living with a nonagenarian, and Our Lady of Paris taunted me about a promise I had failed to keep. I fell asleep as much to escape my thoughts as to give in to my exhaustion. I felt alone as at any time in my life.

The room was very dark and for a few moments I had no idea where I was when I heard knocking at the door. “James. . . James?” It was Madame M. “will you be taking a dinner this evening?” she called through the door.

“Yes, Madame,” I croaked back, “just tell me the time.”

“In one hour.”

Work *does* drive away worry. In an hour I had most of my things arranged in dresser drawers and the wardrobe, photos of my daughters and my notebooks on the desk. It was the only distraction; no radio, no TV, and a window that looked out into an office in the *mairie* for the 15th Arrondissement. My mood elevated a little as I made a list of some things I needed from the store, a *Herald-Tribune*, some batteries for my walkman, some cigarettes for my nerves. And a phone card and some postage. I’d just finished scribbling these down when Mme M was at my door.

“*À table, James, à table.*”

When I took my chair at the table in Mme M’s living room, which served as a dining room as well, I couldn’t help be struck by the contrasts that jet-age travel creates. Within a day’s time I’d had a farewell dinner with my twenty-eight-year-old girlfriend, to a welcome dinner with a 93-year old widow. “*Bienvenue a Paris, James.*”

It didn’t take me long to learn that Mme M had 93 years to get set in her ways, and those ways were pretty set by now. She informed me that she would prepare three meals each day for me, except for breakfast and lunch on Sundays, when she would be at church. All meals were included in the very reasonable 900 francs per month rent. And she meant *full* meals.

I told her that I would most likely be at the university or elsewhere for most of my lunches, but I almost retracted that midway through her first dinner. After some seventy years in France Mme M had not only lost the English gift for ruining perfectly good food, she had learned to prepare rather delicious and complicated dishes with the alacrity of a short order cook. As I learned in the weeks to come she shopped each day

for fresh items, with a Gallic fastidiousness. She brought me along one day to meet each of the proprietors of the little *boucherie*, *pâtisserie*, and *fromagerie* shops in the neighboring streets. Each addressed her as “Madame” with a respect Parisian shopkeepers were unaccustomed, it seemed, to accord the average customer. Her stature in *le voisinage* was also physiological; she towered over all of them.

Meals always included a meat course, and always with a different sauce. Each course she brought from the kitchen, and taken sparingly with me, before she fetched another course. She firmly declined my offer to bus dishes back to the kitchen, or to assist in the “washing up” as she still referred to in her Englishness.

Her solicitousness extended to surveying which cheeses, wines and breads I preferred (as though it was expected that I would have refined my tastes in each category, the way a Frenchman might), so that she could keep them well-stocked. Back in San Diego, because I worked mostly at home, and my girlfriend had a nine-to-five job, I did the bulk of the meal preparation. So this arrangement was turning out to be a special treat. But for all her solicitousness Madam M never lost her somewhat regal bearing.

“My sons encouraged me to take in boarders a few years ago. I think they were concerned about my being alone so much,” she related at our first dinner. “But I like conversation and doing for others. It gives one something to focus upon other than oneself,” she added in a tone that indicated anything but subservience. I reflected that if taking in a boarder and cooking for others was the secret to such robust longevity then I was on the right track with my life back home.

Mme M was what Hollywood central casting’s idea would be of one of those British elderly women mystery writers: self-possessed, impossible to gull, and indomitable. Her thick, gray-brown hair was pulled back into a bun, she wore wire-rimmed glasses that spent most of their time dangling from a chain that rested on her still ample bosom. The years were contradicted by the clarity of her eyes and skin, though perhaps the teeth were not original equipment (she is, after all, British). But she stood erect and trim in her requisite tweed skirt, Peter Pan-collared blouse closed with a brooch at the throat, and was rarely without her trusty gray cardigan. She only removed her apron when she had served the last course. In sum, if you bumped into her in a market in Yorkshire, where she was reared, you might presume that she never spent a day, much less a couple of lifetimes, in France.

More than in years alone, Mme M had lifetimes enough for several people. Her English lifetime began in a village near York before the turn of the century, where she spent her school years, eventually studying, as she was careful to immediately clarify, to be a “secretary”. A “real” secretary, not the typing and filing and phone-answering office worker; but someone who manages personal affairs for busy persons of importance, such as social calendars, correspondence, and sundry other personal arrangements, for those who cannot be bothered with doing such things for themselves. Like she said: “doing for others.”

I could not help thinking, between the delicious morsels of *coq au vin*, what a wonderful thing it would be to have someone to take care of all the aggravating and time-consuming tasks and responsibilities that encumbered me. It had taken me months, with

reams of correspondence and forms, arranging bills to be paid, and sundry other matters between California and Paris, just to settle this visiting professorship. Had there been a “real” secretary to handle all that “stuff” I might have had enough time to get my French in shape to not look like a deer in headlights every time a Parisian fired a full clip of idioms into my brain.

The responsibilities of a “real” secretary became a good deal clearer when Mme M cited as example the “situation” that brought her to France in the first place. Having studied French along with “real” secretary subjects, Mme M was offered the post as secretary to none other than General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing, commander of the U.S. Expeditionary Forces in France in World War I. This explained the rigid soldier in the sepia-toned photos in the breakfront in the parlor. I resolved to have a better look later.

And so began a stream of stories, easily coaxed from Mme M by my genuine interest, that traced the tumultuous history of 20th Century France. There were encounters with the rich and famous and powerful at diplomatic meetings, balls, and visitations from dignitaries, all arranged by a “real” secretary. In the course of these responsibilities Mme M met one of the founders of the first of Paris’ *grand magazines*, or department stores. They became engaged, and he went off to the trenches of World War I.

“He returned in 1918 as a *grande mutilé*,” she related with matter-of-factness, while sliding a *creme caramel* in front of me. She pronounced the term with an almost honorific solemnity, but noticing what must have been a look of puzzlement on my face, quickly added: “fully-disabled from his war wounds.” Before my imagination got very far down my own list of the most horrible “mutilations” she added, in the same dispassionate tone, that a mine had blown off one of his arms, and most of the fingers of his remaining hand.

Homer Parrish! I didn’t say Homer Parrish aloud, but that’s who my mind jumped to. He was a character in the film *The Best Year’s of Our Lives*. In the 1946 William Wyler film about three American Armed Forces vets returning from the WWII, Homer, a sailor, is a double amputee. He was played by Harold Russell, who, in fact, had lost his hands and parts of his arms. I wondered if she had ever sent the film.

It wasn’t an idle mental reference. I was going to be using the film in one of my courses at the University of Paris, and the professor part of me, always eager to keep my material lively for me as well as the students, made a note to impress my French students when I discussed the film. I would have to clarify the term “double amputee” for them. My lecture would gain a tint of erudition when Homer Parrish became a *grande mutilé*.

Furthermore there was a poignant element with respect to Homer’s misfortune. He, too, was supposed to marry the girl next door (literally, “the girl next door”), when he returned from the war. But he couldn’t put his missing arms, now replaced by prostheses, around her, and, in the movie, only after they pass this true test of their love, do we celebrate the *denouement* of their marriage.

Could a similar test of love taken place in 1918 when Monsieur M returned from his war almost identically mutilated? I didn’t have to wait long for an answer.

“The hospital of his recuperation was near Bordeaux, and we were married in a small church as soon as he was fit enough.” Mme M was no shirker when it came to pledging her troth, and Mon. M was fortunate she was so prepared “to do for others.”

Monsieur M’s mutilations did not prevent him from siring two sons, both of whom rose to prominence in their chosen fields, nor from expanding the family business beyond the *Île de France*, and holding various positions of honor in commercial associations. Mme M went into less detail about the years of Nazi occupation, which the family “waited out” at their farm “in the Southwest”. I assumed that the farm might have been in Vichy France, and perhaps she didn’t want to raise any questions that Monsieur M had given enough for his country in the previous war. She was also circumspect about the necessity to assist her husband “somewhat in the manner of what one might call a ‘body servant’”.

I tried to get a reasonable mental image of Mon M. A blurry photo of him before the war showed him to be tall, and handsome in the “Gallic” way. Later, the photos I saw in the breakfront were, understandably, head shots. The last one, she said, was taken a few years before his death in 1953. She offered no details about the event or what led up to it.

In contrast to her mother’s curious circumstances. “Mother became senile around age seventy, and tried to commit suicide, but failed,” she said, knowing full well that she’d beaten the genetic lottery on that malady. “However, suicide was a crime punishable either by imprisonment, or commitment to a mental institution in England at that time. And as it happened my father was the local magistrate and my mother’s case came before him. He had her committed to a mental institution; his only real choice.”

This seemed rather unusual to me, a husband having to rule on his wife’s “crime”. Her family story had dark twists that that called to mind the stories of another Yorkshire family, the Brontés.

“Mother subsequently starved herself to death,” she related without a hint as to whether she approved of the sentence her father had handed down. “I had to be here, in France, during this unfortunate time as my husband needed me, you see,” she said in a sighing tone. I sensed that the conflict between “duties” for a “real” secretary must not have been an easy one and this memory rested less comfortably on her mind.

I think these details were offered as a kind of *quid pro quo* for the expected recounting of my own loss. I had told her that Paris was Patty’s favorite city, leaving out the part about Notre Dame. “Then you must enjoy the city as much as possible for the both of you. I’m sure she wishes you to do just that.” It was a consoling statement, especially her use of the active voice. Perhaps we both sensed that we’d reached the edge where what we choose to believe is intensely personal. We changed subject, but I began to feel that Paris might heal the wound it had re-opened.

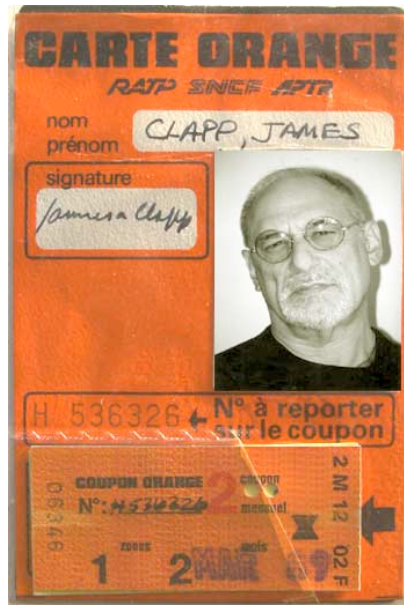
I stayed at Mme M’s for another six weeks. We never returned to the subject of personal loss, most of our discussion revolving around social topics, like crime and drugs, and different policies of different countries, and of course, politics.

As much as I enjoyed her cooking I increasingly found myself stuffing food in my mouth to keep from rebutting Mme M's Thatcher-esque politics. I'd been living in London ten years earlier when Maggie and the Tories roared to the top of the charts and summarily dismantled the Labor government policy that was the subject of my sabbatical research. The Madam PM hadn't done anything since to soften my distaste for her political ideology.

It's difficult enough to get combative on political subjects when you are a guest in another country; but eating someone's food and swallowing their arch-conservative nonsense at the same time is bad for the digestion as well. Mme M apparently took my reticence as agreement as I endured her encomiums on Thatcher and DeGaulle to the jeopardy of my intestines.

In any event I would have had to leave Madame M's sooner or later if I was to have the sort of "genuine Paris experience" I craved. In that regard I was no doubt following in the footsteps of innumerable others who had fired their imaginations on the Paris of the American 'expat' aspiring artists and writers sitting in Montparnasse cafés between the wars.

Not too far from Montparnasse I secured a tiny studio—a flat about the size of a small hotel room—in a capillary street off of one of Haussmann's grand arterial boulevards, Avenue de Gobelins. The street was named after the renowned Gobelin tapestry factory that covered a block just to the north. Like any number of Paris neighborhoods I might have selected it had all the "urban" elements and amenities I was seeking as an anodyne to the typical Southern California lifestyle. Being neither a tourist, nor a visitor, I could refer to the café in the *rez-de-chausée* of my building as "my" café, a few paces away was "my" *Journaux* stand where I bought the *International Herald-Tribune* and *Pariscope*, with its listing of over three-hundred movies playing in the city. Directly across the avenue was "my" *pâtisserie*, dispenser of still warm *baguettes* and the addicting *croissant d'amandes*. After a week or so I sensed a warm familiarity in the 'bonjour' of the baker's wife.



“My” bus stop and taxi rank were in the street directly below “my:” studio. “My” shops for groceries, stationary, “my” *bureau de poste* and *laundrette* were all within a few minutes walk. And, importantly, “my” Metro station, *Les Gobelins*, was only a block away.

This was “urbanism” as it was meant to be: the needs of daily life conveniently arrayed around me, and near to hand multiple modes of transport to access the delights of the city at large. Each month at the station I purchased my bus and Metro pass, called a *Carte Orange*. I called it my “car” orange, since it substituted ideally for my car back home; but this “car” I “parked” in the little sleeve provided for it with my wretched ID photo.

In the Gobelins neighborhood I settled into a rhythm of writing, teaching and exploring the city, having traded off the splendid meals of Madame M for not being tied to her schedule, and the comforts of her spacious apartment for my cramped studio with its “kitchen” in a closet, a small dinner table that did double duty as a desk, a one-foot wide balcony, and toilet that required that I lean on the sink and slide my butt under it to get seated. On the plus side I was able to reach my coffee on the cooktop without having to leave my bed.

But I was content, and convinced that it was easier to be a ‘minimalist’ in a great city than in a mediocre one.

Madame Xäe and the Thatcher Ladies

I was still staying at Mme M’s when she asked me to speak to her French Women’s group on a topic of my choosing. It seemed an opportunity for me to test some of my thoughts and opinions on contemporary city life and politics in France and America on an audience that would be the age of my students’ parents. But knowing that my views and opinions would be at some variance with Madame M’s I asked for a date that would come up after I had relocated to my own apartment to avoid any subsequent awkwardness.

As it happened Mme M's women's group was from her church, the Anglican Church in Paris. It was composed of middle-aged, well-to-do, conservative, Protestant French women, who were learning English with the assistance of lecturers whom Mme M procured. I imagined them to all be coifed in that tight Thatcher "do". There would be, she said, about twenty-five of them, which I assumed must be the entire national cohort of French women who want to learn the language of the people who whipped their ancestors' *derrieres* at Agincourt.

It also turned out that Mme M was unable to escort me to the lecture on the appointed day because she had a medical appointment. (Was she mortal after all?) That duty fell to a Col. Harrow, who was following Mme M's orders.

Though long retired, the Colonel, in British military fashion, retained his military title. He was also a deacon at Mme M's church, and told me that he rather go back to the Malaysian prison at Changi, where he nearly expired from the brutal amusements of his Japanese hosts, than give a lecture to a French women's group. The Colonel had come to France after his retirement, to be an "advisor" to the French military on "counterinsurgency tactics" which, as he put it, he had to remain "buttoned-up about".

I took a quick liking to Harrow. He was a bit, as even he might say, "regimental" in his demeanor, always the colonel. There was a taint of the *Bridge on the River Kwai* Alec Guinness in him, the stubbornly-proud British officer who won't be broken. But this was leavened somewhat by his badger-like appearance, and portliness on a stocky frame, topped by a ruddy complexion with slightly-startled eyes. As we walked in the steamy Paris summer sauna he gave me a nice little lecture on the Hotel des Invalides, Napoleon's hospital for what was left of his glorious armies. The "little corporal," Harrow's reference, lay entombed next door in mausoleum of cool marble.

As he described the hospital (now a museum) I thought it might be the perfect opportunity to ask a military man if, since there were *grande mutiles*, if there were such things as *petites mutiles*. After all, insurance companies that write accidental death and dismemberment policies (I think I had one myself) have calculated the compensations for loss of a finger, a hand, a leg, an eye, etc. So an organization equally as bureaucratic, like the French Army, must have had some "qualifications" for those receiving the title of *Grande Mutile*. But discretion decided me against raising the matter; for all I knew, Harrow's harshly treated at Changi, might have left him missing some parts himself.

I had already raised the Col's eyebrows when he told me that he'd been an advisor to the French Army. Something prompted me to say: "I suppose that they really could have used some help; they seem to have been on a losing streak that began with Waterloo."

"They did have a disturbing tendency for some length of time to fight the current war with the military tactics of the previous war," he replied. You had to like Harrow; he wasn't the type to let his consultancy spoil the long tradition of Anglo-French rivalry.

My lecture was to be delivered in a large room in the upper story of the Hotel des Invalides, at the level of the Mansart roof. Instead of amputees and the sick and maimed living in what must have once been an open ward, there were arranged in a two-row semi-circle of folding chairs Mme M's women's group of perhaps twenty-five or thirty.

Appropriately they seemed almost to come to attention when Harrow ushered me into the room and then disappeared like a phantom. Perhaps if they sent women knights of tight at Agincourt, the British might have been daunted, I thought. Immediately a woman got up and came forward to greet me. She shook my hand with just the right firmness, and for just long enough to be well-meant and proper.

She was the most beautiful woman I had seen since I arrived in Paris. She was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. Tall, curvaceous, and with sandy hair and luminous jade-green eyes, she reminded me much of the actress Jacqueline Bisset, but even more beautiful. My legs went a little rubbery.

“*Bienvenue*. . . I mean, ‘wel-come,’ professor. We must speak Anglais today, *n’est-ce pas?*” she said as she released my hand. Her hybrid English made her even more appealing, but she would have been just as beautiful speaking Urdu.

I told myself to be cool, although I felt like the first time I asked a girl to dance. It was good counsel; I had already noticed that the temperature in the room was sweltering. The air was close and fetid. We were on the top floor under the metal part of the roof, on which the hot summer sun had been beating for the better part of a day. Many a wounded soldier must have thought he was in hell recuperating in this ward. In winter they must have thought they were back out on the Russian steppes, retreating from one of the “little corporal’s” tactical blunders.

She introduced herself a Mme Xäe, and a voice inside me said “*merde*” and I was immediately seized with an instant jealous hatred of the fortunate Monsieur Xäe. While she stood beside my chair giving a rather labored and lengthy introduction, in English, including some bits of misinformation that must have been supplied by Mme, I struggled to force out of my thoughts prurient images involving myself and Mme Xäe. Maybe it was the effect that Mme Xäe could have on a man that caused Col Harrow’s hasty retreat. I was considering following his example when I heard her finish her introduction and, mercifully, sit well to the side of me, beyond my peripheral vision.

I took the theme for my talk from the *Bicentenaire*, which I though was very clever approach, except that probably everybody giving a speech in France that year probably thought the same thing. The substance of my theme dealt with—what else should one talk to a conservative women’s group about?—“the role of the city in the women’s revolution.”

I had been playing with this little theory on the liberation of women as the third great revolution in human history, after the agricultural and urban-industrial revolutions. I had written an essay about how the *city* was the “great liberator” of women because it changed the nature of work and the structure of the family in ways that provided avenues of economic liberation for women. My less noble intent was to get to Margaret Thatcher, who I characterized as a leader of the forces of reaction, a traitor to the emancipation of her gender even while posing as its icon.

It was a dirty little trick, but no worse than a lot of academics do in classrooms every day. Like Don Vito Corleone, “The Godfather,” I settled some scores with it: trashing Thatcher for repealing the legislation on which I had been doing my sabbatical

research a decade earlier, and giving myself the delight in wondering what Mme M would hear from the women's group about my *ad feminam* on her beloved PM.

The applause was polite, but more than perfunctory, and Mme Xäe was generous in her expressions of gratitude for my interesting "*penses*". It occurred to me that, since I had no idea how good their English was, maybe much of what I said has just gone over their Thatcher-coiffed heads.

But when Mme Xäe escorted me to the door she mentioned that she would communicate the essence of my talk to Mme M, and, struggling to keep the *-er* ending from coming out *-ay*, added "Madame has much esteem for Madame Thatcher." Then to my delight and surprise she gave me a slightly mischievous smile with another, slightly-firmer good-bye handshake. It pleased me to think that, if my lascivious fantasies with her were to go unrealized, at least Madame Xäe and I might be political soulmates.

After cooling myself with a visit to "little corporal's" marble tomb I resolved to head for Notre Dame, which I had been avoiding since the day of my arrival. I would climb to one of the towers, high up where the gargoyles glare out at the city, and hopefully, exorcise some of my own demons.

The Unknown Lady of Paris

I was nearing the end of my stay in Paris. As the departure date neared my thoughts turned more to settling back into "home" life and its routines. I had come to grips with some of the fears and anxieties I had brought with me, and was at a stand-off with some others. The University was pleased with my work, and faculty members, some of whom has become friends, spoke of inviting me back.

A month before my departure my girlfriend had visited from California for a few weeks, with mixed results. All of the ingredients for romance are present in Paris, the parks and tree-lined boulevards, the restaurants, the exuberance for the romantic life of the Parisians themselves. We had walked along the Seine in the twilight, found all of the Modigliani's that were her artistic passion to be found in Paris, roamed though Pere Lachaise Cemetery to visit Chopin, Oscar Wilde, Edith Piaf, and other romantic lives past.

But I felt unsuccessful at trying to re-weave those fraying strands of our relationship. Perhaps I now had too much experience with Paris *herself*. So many writers had portrayed her as unpossessable: so many films had worked the theme of failed romance, a theme that seemed so relevant to my own feelings. Whatever it was, by the time I escorted her back out to DeGaulle to put her on the plane home I held the prospect that it was only a matter of time before it would be over, only I was better prepared for what seemed inevitable.

It was a couple of days before she left that the nightmare happened. I say 'nightmare' because that's what returned to me in my sleep several times before I left Paris, as it has occasionally in years since. We were walking along Avenue Des Gobelins early in the morning, taking our laundry to the *lavorie*.

It's sound that triggers the nightmare, because it always begins with *that* sound. My ears recognize it instantly, then my stomach; it's a stomach-churning sound. To me

it's the sound of the mechanical colliding with the biological, like the 'crump' of a thousand pound bomb in a rice paddy, the 'thwack' of a linebacker's helmet in the back an unaware receiver, the 'thud' of a half-frozen side of beef slammed on a butcher block. All together.

We were a good fifty metres away when I first heard that sound behind us, in the broad Avenue des Gobelins. The girl must have been on her way to the laundry as well. There was a bag of clothing, socks, a bra, a shirt and some jeans scattered from it over the street.

When I heard the sound I turned in time to see the girl, and the bag of clothing, coming down on the cobbles of the damp street. She landed as limp and lifeless as her laundry, like a rag doll tossed from a child's pram.

The taxi idled a few metres behind where she came down, showing no evidence of the impact, motionless, the way a bull might hover over a downed matador. We stood at the curb, transfixed.

Nothing moved: not the girl, not the taxi, not us; there was no traffic. The surface of the street glistened from the gutter cleansing from the municipal workers and their witch-brooms. Most of the shops were still shuttered. Only a few dumbstruck bystanders like ourselves, scattered along the sidewalk, were witness to a *tableau* with the motionless girl in a heap as its focal point. The girl's hair lay over her face, an arm was twisted behind her back, a shoe, upended, had come to rest two metres away. She was as disheveled and lifeless as her scattered laundry.

Then the taxi suddenly backed away from her body, squealing his tires as he accelerated forward and around her to escape the scene. But its driver had apparently not noticed was that one of those small French delivery vans had been stopped in one of the side streets behind him. The delivery truck roared into pursuit, leaning on both horn and accelerator. They both passed by us when about thirty metres or so the taxi slowed and stopped, reconsidered with a short burst, but stopped again at the sound of the van's horn.

The taxi driver got out and stood beside his cab, a young man of North African appearance, perhaps from Algeria, or Tunisia. He stood silently, still smoking his cigarette, as the man from the delivery van, a burly Frenchman perhaps in his fifties came striding toward him spewing expletives, his face red with rage. The taxi driver's face was impassive.

By now, actually less than a minute of time since that sickening sound, the street became more animated. There were shouts from bystanders at the taxi driver, exhortations to violence. The van driver reached into the idling taxi, turned off the engine and removed the keys. But nobody laid a hand on the taxi driver. It occurred to me that in the US, and some other countries the taxi driver might have been beaten to a pulp by now. I could feel my own rage rise in me, particularly at expressionless face of the taxi driver, his almost casual drags on his cigarette. But I held my temper and laundry; with a sudden acuteness I felt that this was not my country, my city. I was the *etranger-voyeur*.

My girlfriend said nothing, but gripped my arm to the point where her nails dug into my flesh. Perhaps it occurred to her, as it did to me, that the crumpled body in the street might well have been hers. She had considered going to the laundry on her own this morning, but was daunted by her minimal French. That could easily have been her life, her laundry, spilled out in a damp Paris street.

Down where the girl lay motionless a few people ventured into the street, some to direct traffic around the body, others out of curiosity, or to confirm the worst. Most, like us, stood at the curb. From near the girl's body a half-sob, half-shriek split the silence. It issued from a woman in a bathrobe and holding a small dog and reverberated off the street and buildings before it was replaced by that familiar wail familiar from so many French films, the piercing Eeeee-Awww, Eeeee-Awww siren of French police cars and ambulances.

We did our laundry in silence. Not only my residency in Paris, but so much else seemed to be coming to an end that tragic morning.