

LIFE IN PARIS: THE REAL THING:

By Jeanne Feldman,
an American in Paris



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INTRODUCTION: WHY FRANCE?

Why am I still here? I have been here sixteen years, and I would be the first to tell you it's been rough at times. As an American, I had an idealized vision of "life in France" that proved, in the end, to be superficial. It simply did not contain or explain some of the hard realities that I encountered. Despite that, there's obviously something that has been keeping me here. It's that "something" that I would like to share with you.

First comes – personal style. As far as I'm concerned, the French have an absolute genius for turning the ordinary into something extraordinary. For instance, I was once out shopping in the local Monoprix supermarket. Suddenly I noticed a woman who was, shall we say, mature. Gray hair. Medium height. Average, really. In the U.S. she probably would have completely faded into the background. Not this woman. Her glass frames were bright scarlet. So they could match her red pants and go with the red highlights in her scarf. Which set off her tailored gray blazer. Now that's what I call style. Which brings me to French scarves. French scarves know what to do. They tie themselves. I dare to wear scarves in Paris. I wouldn't have dreamed of wearing them in the U.S.

When I was young I wouldn't allow myself to be stylish. It seemed to me that I had to make a choice between being "brainy" or being "stylish." Here in France, I don't have to make that choice. I can be both.

I also appreciate the fact that French people admire the intellect as much as they do style. They like to think about things in depth. Here is an excerpt from a response I sent to the American author of an article in an American magazine.

"... you and I have a real different idea of what the word "intellectual" means. For me, it has nothing to do with knowing a lot of facts (which is the definition I get from your article). Intellectual for me (and the Merriam-Webster dictionary) is exploring the world of ideas-- thinking about things, analyzing and developing ideas. Facts ain't got a whole lot to do with it"

I now train and coach French executives in international business communication. I do enjoy some of the workshops that I lead, when for instance, we're suddenly off discussing the "Freudian analysis of fairytales" by Bruno Bettelheim. Now that's my kind of subject!

I have also come to appreciate the French way of being friends. It's rather difficult to start a friendship, but once begun, it's for life. We just enjoy being together –otherwise

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known in English as "hanging out." It's really great to analyze the state of the world, (in depth) during lunch or dinner. I remember spreading out the times between meeting with the same friend in the US so I wouldn't "use up" the friendship. Here I continually see the same people over and over again. As a matter of fact, it is now rather difficult to become a new friend of mine since I'm spending all my free time hanging out with the friends I've already got. We weave a tapestry of friendship together.

All that, plus the food – what more could you want?

So, although I may complain about certain aspects of my life in France, there are many other things that I admire and appreciate. Vive la France!

What follows is a series of articles on life in France showing how I had to expand my vision of life to include "another way of doing things." It's about real life, where you have to make your own way by integrating into the culture that's there.

1: MY APARTMENT

A MOUSE IN THE HOUSE (ER, APARTMENT)

Living in Paris is supposed to be glamorous and sensual. I suppose it is. But has anybody ever told you about the mice?

My apartment faces a rooftop lawn and garden, which I love. As a matter of fact, my apartment is set so far down into the lawn that you when you climb out my window you're right there. There are no doors that open onto this space--only apartment windows like mine facing the hidden inner courtyard. The lawn and garden are peaceful and calm, just like being in the countryside.

The lawn is lovely, the garden is lovely, the surrounding bushes and trees are lovely. What is not so lovely are the mice who live in this lawn and can climb right into your apartment through the window (the French do not believe in window screens, -- there aren't any).

Actually this was my second mouse. The first one I managed to kill by putting out poisoned wheat grains (ugh). The apartment manager came into my apartment the next day to check on a leak, pulled out the board that covers the bottom of my tub and, voilà, one dead mouse. He was quickly thrown down the garbage chute ("vide ordures").

Now, let me tell you about mouse number two.

My deep, peaceful sleep was suddenly interrupted by a munching noise. "What's that?". Scrabble, scrabble noise. Uh oh. Yup--there's his shadow. I keep a flashlight by my bed which I kept flashing on and off, and that must have startled him. At one point he climbed up the inside of my window curtains! All I saw was a long gray shape swooping up those curtains. I was sure it was a rat.

So, the next night, I kept the kitchen light on all night. I guess this mixed up his bio-rhythms, since mice are nocturnal. They sleep during the day and come out (and wreak havoc such as mice turds all over your bathtub) at night. I say this because, suddenly, that morning Mr. Mouse (no, wait, this is a French mouse so I'm sure his name is M. Mouse) scampers out in a flurry of activity. He's in the kitchen on the floor. No, now he's on the stove. Now running across the living room. Then into the bathroom -- and I lock the door. "I guess he'll take refuge under the bathtub."

Before I can think more about this, I have a visit from my friend Iris. Now, Iris is one of the luckiest people I have ever known. (And this visit proves to be a very lucky visit for M. Mouse.) Who else could have her purse pickpocketed (including all her keys, drawing supplies since she's an artist, passport, etc.), and then what happens? A wonderful man who reminds her of a leprechaun finds her purse with almost everything still in it and returns it all intact. Anyway, Iris comes over to visit. I tell her about my mouse problem and the fact that I have to kill it. At this point, I don't want to. It's not a rat at all, but the most adorable little mouse skipping around my apartment. And smart too. I had put a cherry tomato onto a mouse trap. I actually saw him licking the juices from the tomato and dancing around the trap--without springing it!

So, Iris, taking the side of M. Mouse, "Oh, don't kill it! Why don't you make a trap out of a plastic bag? Put some cheese inside, close the bag and put him outside."

"I'm sorry, I don't see him letting me close the bag."

"Oh, I guess so."

We talk a bit more, and then Iris leaves.

So, I go into the bathroom to brush my teeth. And that damned mouse keeps crossing the bathroom floor right behind me! "Get back under the tub!" He does. Then comes right out again. I have a large clothes hamper beside the wall. During one interim under the tub, I move the basket away from the wall. Then the next time M. Mouse creeps along that wall, ... Bam! Trapped under the hamper. I know he isn't dead because his tail is still wagging. Quick, quick, I go into the kitchen, put on rubber gloves, grab a plastic bag, put the mouse in, walk to the window, climb out and dump M. Mouse onto the lawn. He is definitely in a state of shock as he staggers off, but alive. I even throw out the cherry tomato into the lawn to encourage his journey back to his real home.

Now all my friends tell me, "He'll be back..."

But, I'm not so sure. You see, M. Cat has just returned from his month-long vacation in the country and is again roaming through the lawn and garden.

We'll see. Or as the French say, "On verra."

THE SIX-YEAR LEAK

Yesterday I took my first shower in my newly repaired bathroom. Ah, what luxury! The day before, two workmen had put the final touches to repairs on the ceilings in both my bathroom and the adjacent closet. These were necessary because of water damage caused by a leak – a six-year leak.

When I moved into my current apartment in Paris in 1997, I noticed that the bathroom and closet ceiling paint was flaking a bit. My new landlord told me that this was caused by a leak in the bathroom above mine, but that it had been fixed. She even hired a team of Polish workmen to scrape, re-plaster and repaint. (Since my landlord at that time was Polish, she used what I call the "Polish connection", a network of undocumented Polish workers who were paid under the table.) We had a special arrangement for the lease, so she paid for the work. You would think that was that. But no, this is Paris where simple things like a leak in the ceiling become sagas. Let us continue.

It seemed to me that the ceiling started to look a bit frowsy again soon after the work was completed. Nothing dramatic -- just a slow deterioration. Soon after that, my landlord decided to move to Switzerland and sold the apartment. The new landlord presented me with a rental contract and pretty much the same rent as before. One thing you must know is that in France, the landlord is normally not responsible for repairs for water damage. Your insurance company is. Therefore, you are required by law to have homeowner's insurance when you rent. I took out a policy and thought nothing much more about it. In the meantime, the flaking continued to get worse. But, since I'm renting the place, I can live with it. Suddenly, one evening I hear a clinking sound. By morning, my clothes closet is flooded, including all my sweaters and knit tops. I am no longer a happy camper. What is going on?

It's at this point that I check with the guardians, a married couple who serve as the building managers. They inform me that the water leak comes from beneath the bathtub of the apartment above mine, but, the bathtub is tiled in. The landlord, Mr. Ruggerio, simply does not want to go to the expense of breaking down the tiles in order to fix the leak. He continually says that he will, however, in order to stall. I then find out that since the leak concerns two private apartments, there is nothing anyone can do. Taking him to court would last years and even then, I would not be assured of a positive outcome. It seems that this game had been going on for six years.

I wanted to speak directly with the renters above me, a Sri Lankan family, with about seven people living in an apartment the size of mine – a studio for one person. Even this presented a challenge as the wife refused to open the door when her husband wasn't there. Finally, I managed to march upstairs and knock on the door when he was there.

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We exchanged insurance information, and he assured me that the leak had been fixed. Then my closet flooded again.

By this time, the damage was so great that it was affecting parts of the building between the privately owned apartments ("les parties en commun"). This proved to be the key moment, because at this point the Syndic could finally come into play. The Syndic is the building management company, and at last they were able to contact the landlord directly to insist he repair the leak. They even sent out a plumber, at their expense, with a humidity checker. Yep—it was still wet on the ceiling. It seems that every time someone above took a bath, water dripped into my apartment.

Soon after that, I found a handwritten note in my mailbox. It was from a woman, saying that she was the upstairs landlord and had never been informed of the leak (six years, uh huh), and the repairs were being done that very week in the apartment above mine. I phoned her at the number she had written in her note to thank her. While speaking, I couldn't resist badmouthing Mr. Ruggiero, who after all, had refused to repair the leak for six years. (But of course -- the villainous Mr. Ruggiero had quickly sold the apartment to this nice lady without telling her about the leak!)

"Oh yes, Mr. Ruggiero. He's my father."

Her father? Oh boy! Protecting his daughter? Who knows. What mattered is that in the end, finally, the upstairs leak was repaired. No more drips. No more floods. No more flaking paint and plaster. Voilà, a happy end to one more Paris saga.

CAT ON A COOL GREEN ROOF

The lawn and rose garden just outside my apartment is a haven for birds in the concrete jungle, and I love it. I've already had a mouse visitor. Now it was time for a cat.

I had just opened my curtains in the morning after a rainy night. Suddenly I noticed a moving shape among the plants just outside my window. A cat. There used to be several cats that roamed the lawn, hunting the birds, but I hadn't seen one in ages. It noticed me, of course, and came towards me, with the closed window between us. I could see that it wanted to come in – it was obvious that it had been locked out all night, and just wanted a bit of shelter. So, I opened my window, and in it jumped. I have to admit I was wary.

"Pee in my apartment, and you're dead meat."

Well, she (it had to be a she, very delicate and shy), didn't pee. What she did was explore every inch of my apartment including under the bed, in the closet and the far corners of my bathroom. I noticed that she was sopping wet, so I wiped her off a bit. But my wariness grew (I can't watch her every minute), and her tail started whipping the air as she approached my front door.

"Lady, it seems to me that you want out of my apartment." So, I put her out the window where she had originally entered, figuring she would go back to her owner's apartment, which, like mine, faced the lawn.

About two hours later, my doorbell rang. It was the husband "gardien". The cat's owners had enlisted his aid to find their to find their pet because, in fact, they didn't live on the garden level. The gardien pointed out the owner, a young woman who was one floor up, on the same side of the courtyard as me. I felt a little guilty at that point that I had let her cat out. Apparently it had jumped down from the balcony onto the lawn, and so could not return "just like that" to her owner.

The gardien, with great difficulty, climbed out my window onto the lawn to search for "Sammy". At the same time, her owner was yelling out the name, repeatedly, for at least fifteen minutes. No luck, I'm afraid.

The gardien climbed back into my apartment and left. Twenty minutes later, Sammy appeared at the other end of the lawn. The companion of Sammy's owner was standing on his balcony, and jumped down onto the lawn to pick up the cat. No luck either. He climbed in through my apartment window and exited out the door.

Then, the owner DEFINITELY saw Sammy under some bushes. The gardien came into my apartment once again and climbed out again through my window, as the companion jumped off the balcony onto the lawn.

"This is not how you go after a cat," I thought. "You don't go after her. You have to wait for her to come to you."

I was right. After at least ten more minutes of vigilant searching, punctuated by plaintive cries of "Sammy, Sammy", the gardien and the companion called it quits. There was no Sammy to be found. A dual exit, this time, through my apartment window.

About an hour later I looked out my window – and, sure enough, there was Sammy! Of course, she wanted to come into my apartment again. I encouraged her, and then, I carefully picked her up. Then let her down when she started to freak out. Pick up, let down, until she tolerated being held. OK, now go! A quick trip out my door, down the

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stairs, ("See the door close, Sammy? Great, nothing at all to freak out about."), across the lobby, up the elevator two floors ("Yes, Sammy. See the elevator doors open and close? Good cat. Good cat").

At last, I rang the bell on the door where I calculated the owner would be. Bingo - a joyful welcome it was! Mission accomplished, I returned to my apartment and felt I had not only done my good deed of the day, but had lessened the guilt load for the week - at least.

2: MY NEIGHBORHOOD

THE 'HOOD HAS A HEART

One of the joys of living in Paris is its village atmosphere. Each neighborhood has its own distinct character, its own rhythm and unique personality. So living in Paris feels "small" because you get to know people in your neighborhood. And at the same time, there is a fabulous transportation system that can easily zip you "out". Let me introduce you to "the 'hood" where I've been living since 1999. The eastern and western borders are the huge rail accesses gouged out of the Parisian earth, which lead to the Gare de l'Est and the Gare du Nord further south. The northern border is the Rue des Roses and the southern border is the Rue Riquet. The Metro stop is Marx Dormoy.

I cannot tell a lie – it has a terrible reputation. Which it did deserve in the past. What does this mean in Paris? OK, I admit there is a drug rehab center on the Rue Philippe de Girard, so we've got a few druggies wandering about. There are also some homeless people who camp out in the street. (Believe me, we're real far from the elegant center of Paris.) Around me flow currents of all and sundry ethnic groups, including, but not limited to Southeast Asians, Chinese, Sri Lankans, North Africans, West Africans (mostly from Senegal) and Central Africans (mainly the Cameroon but also including a few Congolese), plus a Rumanian gypsy tribe and even a few Russians. Poor we are, but if you want to buy an apartment in Paris, this is where you move if you are not rich. It's a choice between a neighborhood like mine, with a bad reputation, or the suburbs. This means that the 'hood is now being discovered by middle class French people whose families have lived for one or more generations in France. At the moment, it's mostly students and young couples with children. The 'hood is being gentrified.

In reality, our neighborhood is a wonderful place to live. It's not violent at all. OK, once I did see two young guys really fighting it out, seriously, on the corner of the main street. But do you know what happened? People in the neighborhood stopped them! Other young men separated the two guys and calmed them down. Fight over. Finished.

Let me interject here my only direct experience with "violence" in the 'hood. One day, while walking from my apartment to the Metro, I passed a young African woman standing in front of a restaurant on my street. Just as I passed in front of her, I felt drops of liquid settling on my arm. It wasn't raining. "My God – she spit on me!" So, of course, I backtracked and spit back and made some weird "I am a powerful witch and don't mess with me" sounds. Then I turned and went on my way. I guess it worked – I never saw her again.

On my street, Rue de Torcy, there is a series of Chinese restaurants, one right after another. I very often return home late from meetings in central Paris. I mean really late, like between eleven pm and midnight. As I walk down the street, I'm surrounded by Chinese restaurants, still open, all with large windows, illuminated, with middle class people sitting at tables who can see if anything bad happens outside. This had made a great difference on the Rue de Torcy.

We also have a covered food market. These markets are a treasure. (I devote an entire chapter to them in my shopping guide, *Best Buys and Bargains in Paris*.) Under one roof are housed stands with an enormous selection of fresh fruits and vegetables, cheese, fish, poultry, meat and gourmet takeout food. This means that for fresh food and produce, I don't have to depend on supermarkets or the twice a week outdoor markets that are available, but far away. Do you know what it's like for an American to taste fruit that tastes like fruit? Ecstasy! And the market is practically across from my front door. I refuse to buy my fruits and vegetables anywhere else but from my favorite Chinese-owned stand in the market. You just can't beat the quality. Their tomatoes even made the cover of my shopping guide! I also adore the two fresh cheese stands. There's something exceptional about choosing exactly the piece you want ("no, just a but more") and then watching them carefully cut and wrap it just for you. Makes my day.

Plus – thank you Chinese – around the corner on the Rue de L'Evangile, we have Paris Store. Do you know what it means to have a Chinese supermarket in your neighborhood in Paris? OPEN ALL DAY SUNDAY – that's what it means! In France, except in tourist areas, stores are supposed to be closed on Sunday. Paris Store is open because, I can only suppose, they are not Catholic (Buddhist perhaps?), so they are closed on Mondays and open the ENTIRE WEEKEND. Joy! Those of us who work during the week can, therefore, do our shopping in the Monoprix on Saturday and at the Paris Store on Sunday. Plus, they have a great selection of Chinese buns and dumplings, Indian spices, tofu and other delicacies such as freshly made Vietnamese soft eggrolls. In addition, they've got all the normal stuff you expect in a supermarket. Wow.

Let me take you on a short walking tour of my neighborhood.

Climb up the steps of the Metro Marx Dormoy exit. Before continuing straight ahead, turn around and look to your left in front of Temple des Affaires. No, no! It's not a Jewish synagogue. It's "a place devoted to a special or exalted purpose" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary): in this case, good deals. Officially it's called a bazaar. I call this type of store a "we sell everything" store. In front of said "temple" you will probably see our neighborhood schizophrenic. You can see him pacing back and forth, muttering to himself in what sounds to me like Arabic but could also be his own made up language. He's always there – pacing back and forth. I've never seen him do more than that.

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Notice also that the street is practically boiling with people. (Poor neighborhood, people gotta walk).

Turn right and continue downhill on the main street, Rue de la Chapelle which changes name and becomes the Rue Marx Dormoy.

On your left you'll soon come upon Istanbul Oriental, a Turkish grocery store. Goodies such as pistachio nuts and golden raisins are piled outside the store, facing the sidewalk. I was a bit suspicious when they first moved in, as there are no Turks in our neighborhood to speak of – they're in another neighborhood. So I asked the guy at the counter if they really came from Turkey. He assured me that they were indeed Turk, but from near the Syrian border which is why they speak Arabic. Yes indeed, that is a good language to know in the 'hood.

Next is the Chinese watch lady where I go to replace my watch batteries. There are usually two or more people sitting in her miniscule space, simply hanging out and talking.

Further down is an office supply and book store, Les Mille et Une Pages. I was surprised at first to see the high level of books in French that they offered. Then I realized that buried in the neighborhood were people like me who loved books. Plus, you can order all kinds of office supplies that, believe me, you cannot find anywhere else. For anyone who has read about my experiences becoming a free-lance worker in France – this store found self-adhesive tabs in France! From Denmark. Vive la mondialisation (i.e. globalization)! No more waiting for my semi-annual trip to the U.S. for this item. They also sell exquisite art post cards that are among the best I've ever seen.

Then comes a "phone home" telephone store. It used to be called "Bijouteries, Fantasies, Cadeaux," with rather attractive merchandise both in the window and in the store itself. But every time I passed by, I saw a dark man with a mustache lurking in the back of the store. He looked like he would kill you if you didn't buy anything. Naturally I never went in, although I did see someone alive inside once. Obviously, the business went broke and Mr. Lurking Mustache had to leave.

After that is L'Etoile de Falenne. The owner is a young man from Senegal in West Africa who imports fabulous African fabric and designs clothing to order. I know this because I have already bought three pairs of African pants. I love them. They are beautiful, comfortable, and my last pair has little icons of Africa printed all over. Since I'm not African, I consider it a fashion statement.

Finally comes the restaurant Ganesha – the first authentic Sri Lankan restaurant in the 'hood. During the past ten years, many Sri Lankans have settled, in Paris, most centered just to the north of the Gare du Nord in an area called "Little Jaffna" after the capital city of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. And the 'hood is just to the north of Little Jaffna. I do admit that the food in Ganesha is not the greatest, but I enjoy eating there regularly to schmooze with the waiters who speak better English than French. And the spiced tea is very good indeed. I suppose they chose the restaurant name because of the Hindu Temple in the 'hood, the only one in Paris, at 72 Rue Philippe de Girard. Every September they organize a giant parade in the streets of the Paris devoted to the Indian god Ganesh.

Their website is: <http://www.templeganesh.fr/>

Turn around, come back up the street to the Rue Riquet, and turn right. You'll pass by the seemingly new bakery, Festival des Pains. In fact, the people who were there before just retired, leaving place for a new baker to arrive. This happens on a regular basis throughout Paris. Being a baker is a really high stress job. You work long hours, getting up in the middle of the night, including weekends and holidays. So, after a few concentrated years, you sell your business to somebody new and then retire.

After the new bakery is the Association La Chapelle that houses neighborhood support groups and classes. Then comes the Vietnamese restaurant Pho 18. It started out as a takeout place – I went there all the time for their fabulous grilled chicken. Then, all last summer they closed. And stayed closed through mid-September. When they re-opened, it was no longer a takeout place, but a full-fledged Vietnamese restaurant. I still love the food, and they are the nicest people.

After the junky clothes shop is a real estate agent. There's another one across the street that just opened, one more sign that we've been discovered by the French/French.

Then, after the small parfumerie, is my favorite cleaners, or "pressing" in French. The current owners are Cambodian and, like the watch lady, there are always people hanging out there. Often you'll see one of the neighborhood Chinese transvestites from the hair salon nearby. He/she will be chatting with the woman who does alterations on a sewing machine in full sight, just inside the street window. The pressing people know everyone in the neighborhood, and I always bring them my clothes to be cleaned and/or altered.

Turn left at the Indian restaurant Mehran. I'm not sure what's going on here. It's been there for several years, and there's never anybody there. Is it a front for some Pakistani mishmash? Who knows. Onward onto the pedestrian shopping street, the Rue L'Olive (it's curious that there's only one olive – you'd have thought it would be a bunch). This pedestrian shopping street shows the genius of France. Practically dead when I arrived,

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it is now surging with people, cafes, babies, dogs and life. And you can find gadgets, toys, bedding, makeup, clothes and leather goods among other things. There are also several cafés, crowded at lunchtime, where you can relax in the afternoon with an espresso or mint tea. It truly demonstrates the French genius for making the ordinary extraordinary.

Immediately on your left is a poultry/butcher chicken grilling place like they have on many food shopping streets in Paris. This too has just changed hands when the former owners retired. It is now "halal" which is Muslim for kosher. They did, however, keep the stout French lady who roasts the chickens to a mouth watering tastiness. She was not there when I moved into the neighborhood. There was a man who left, and then they kept trying to find a replacement. They tried this man and that man. Each man was terrible and didn't last. In between each man, the stout French lady grilled delicious chicken. Finally, they got the message and she has been there ever since.

Next is Nicolas, a wine store franchise. The owners here seem to last two to three years. When I moved in, there was a nice young married couple. They were replaced by two guys who were in turn replaced by two more guys. I love the current pair, especially the young man with the high pitched voice who wears glasses. Where else but in France can you go into your local wine store not only to buy wine but to chat about the psychological violence that can be felt indirectly in upper class Parisian neighborhoods? He also saved me in terms of opening wine bottles. They're just now getting into screw tops, but sometimes the top is so firmly attached to the bottom that it's almost impossible to get it off. The tip from my favorite wine guy? Use a nutcracker. It works.

Next are several vegetable stands, all owned by the "five Tunisian cousins". I don't know if this is exact, but they are definitely all related and from North Africa. They all work very hard and started by taking over one veggie stand that was owned by a French/French when I moved in. They now own and run four fruit and vegetable stands on the Rue l'Olive.

Look straight ahead along the Rue l'Olive. Further down on the left hand side is another bakery that has recently changed hands. It is now the best bakery in the entire 'hood. On weekends you'll see people lined up all the way over to the next store waiting patiently in line to buy a delicious bagette or pain.

Turn at the first right, and make a quick left to enter the covered market. This is the place. It almost died because of competition from the supermarkets. But now it's starting to go up as more and more French/French are discovering it. I just hope my favorite merchants can hang on long enough. Apparently, the city is going to renovate the entire market building some time in the future. It's actually a beautiful structure, but decrepit and not well-maintained. During the time the building is under renovation, the merchants

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will have to do business outside, in a space just across the street from the market. I asked several of the merchants if they minded being outside for months, and they all seemed very even about it. More than me!

At any rate, now you can wander around the market. Here are some of my favorites:

Walk straight back and you'll find a terrific cheese stand. Hard cheese, soft cheese, goats cheese, sheep cheese, you get the picture. It's all fresh, and they slice it into large chunks to order.

Right across and down from them is a poultry stand. They also have really creative dishes such as rabbit terrines, foie gras, etc. And, they are artists. When you want a chicken or turkey scallop, they carve each one separately, to order, cleanly. It's a joy to watch. And the eggs. Sometimes the yolks are actually golden.

Just past the poultry stand on your right is my favorite fruit and veggie stand, owned by a Chinese couple. What I also like is that every weekend, their son and daughter help out at the stand. From what I can see, I don't think the son will be selling vegetables after he graduates high school.

To the right of the vegetables is "my" cheese lady. Her stand is smaller than the other cheese stand, and so had less choice. But SHE is larger. I mean, this lady is big. Really big. And she doesn't mind it a bit! As a matter of fact, she radiates good will and confidence. I like to support my local merchants, and she and I are now at the point of joking when I drop by for my bi-weekly chunks of fresh cheese.

Exit the market opposite the veggie stand. Once outside, you'll see, across the street, my favorite pharmacie. It's a standby in the neighborhood. The owner is a middle-aged Frenchman who is polite, upstanding, understanding, knowledgeable and efficient. What more could you ask? When I moved into my apartment here, I decided to choose the best merchants in the area and then frequent them, and them alone, in order to establish a relationship. I was right on about this pharmacy, as I have even found some great doctors in the area from the handwritten list in their little black book.

Now make a quick left, then a right turn onto the Rue Evangile (I suppose the name comes from the fact that it runs along the back of the church). Mind! Be careful when crossing the street. French drivers do not like to stop when a human body intervenes between them and where they want to go. This makes for some interesting cat and mouse games, as most French people will cross right into traffic. There must be a lucky star overlooking Paris as so far I have never seen anyone get hit.

On your right you'll see La Maison Thai, known in the 'hood as le Fast Food Thai. This amazing place has the best tasting Thai food I've ever eaten – for 4 euros! It has got to be the best restaurant deal in Paris. Starting out as a takeout, they added four tables inside and three out in the alley. It's now a hit! Especially with the neighborhood artists.

This is followed by Paris Store, the Chinese supermarket that I mentioned at the beginning. At the end of the block on your left is a park with the neighborhood bums, mostly from Guadeloupe. Sometimes they sit and yell at each other in a drunken stupor. Luckily, the park is surrounded by a high fence. Just ignore them if they're too loud.

Opposite is a quiet, tree-lined park. And in the middle of this park is – a well. Yes, the city of Paris started drilling an artesian well in 1863, by order of Baron Haussmann himself. They found water twenty years later (!) in 1883 at 719 meters (about 2,000 feet). Eventually, however, the well became unusable, so in 2000 they drilled again and this time found water at 740 meters (about 2,225 feet), putting it well below the pollution level. I can't really put into words what it feels like to draw water from the well. Since it's usually crowded with other people from the 'hood , I suppose they all feel the same as I do.

It's obvious I really appreciate living in Paris and, as far as I'm concerned, the 'hood really does have a heart. So does France. Imagine living in a country where, once, on the morning all news radio, the main news item was (roughly translated):

"Wearing black masks and hoods, armed gunmen broke into the town hall of Saint Denis where they are now holding twelve local politicians hostage, including the mayor. They are threatening to kill everyone, unless their demands are met."

Just what were these demands?

Soccer tickets.

It seems that the Stade de France was sold out for a very important game, and, well, the poor guys were desperate.

Vive la France.

THE SWIMMING POOL

One of the distinctions of Paris is its system of municipal swimming pools. I happen to live within walking distance of one, the Piscine Hébert. It's clean and well maintained, but there is one thing. Some months ago, a French bureaucrat ("fonctionnaire") decided to make the showers in our pool "mixte" i.e. men and women using the same showers! Furthermore, the showers in our pool are completely open – basically a bunch of showerheads stuck in the ceiling of a big room with drains. No shower curtains, no doors. I did finally manage to get the "scoop" on what really happened. It appears that local fundamentalist Muslims were demanding that men and women not only have separate showers, but that they swim on separate days of the week. The pool administration, instead of merely holding its ground ("We'll keep it like it is, thank you."), decided to "one-up" the fundamentalists. "Oh yeah? Well from now on, we'll have mixed men and women's showers – Nah, nah, neh, nah, nah!" (I do believe that most of the pool administration is masculine.)

Bien sûr I have now mastered the technique of washing, soaping and rinsing without removing my bathing suit. This requires a great deal of skill and is, of course, much harder for a woman to pull off than a man.

I also have the honor to be one of the "regulars" at the "Piscine Hébert for several years now. I go there several times a week, first thing in the morning. It's part of my weekly routine; this is how it goes:

The first thing you have to deal with is the "caisse" where you pay. Usually there's someone there, but sometimes there isn't. When not, "yeah!" just go on up and swim!

Up the stairs you go for the most important operation of the pre-swim period. Behind a counter at the top of the stairs is a cast of characters I call "the guys". Their first job is to take your ticket and give you a basket.

My out and out favorite is Léon who comes from the R.D.C. ("République Démocratique du Congo"). I have nicknamed him the "King in Exile". Handsome, tall, elegant and above all, dignified, Léon can usually be seen bantering back and forth with the swimmers or expounding intelligently about some current event. I really have a hard time imagining him in such a dull and dreary job when it's obvious that he's bright and well educated. Then, there's Momo who is Jordanian and sometimes plays classical music instead of techno on the CD player that sits on the counter. Or "Le Rappeur", who is tall, good-looking, and you're lucky to get a "mmmfh" when you say "bonjour" to him. This is in contrast to Daniel, "L'Homme au Casquette" (The man with a cap). Daniel,

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who does indeed always wear a cap, is an extrovert, outgoing and friendly to all. Occasionally there's a woman, but they don't seem to last. It's a 99.999% guy's world.

With basket in hand, your first operation is to remove your shoes in the reception area. There used to be signs to this effect, but they all somehow got removed, lost, torn down, etc. You're "supposed to know" that for cleanliness sake, no shoes are allowed in the changing area. What I do is walk over to one of two changing rooms right in the reception area (I believe I'm the only person to do this) and change into my swimming gear and thongs right there, all in one shot. After that, I carry my basket down to the lockers by the stairs that lead down to the showers.

Finally, it's time to swim! Thanks to Daniel, I have discovered cloth swim caps. One day I had forgotten to bring my rubber cap (dementia approaches), and it looked like I wouldn't be able to swim. Since I'm a "regular", Daniel offered to lend me a cap, which turned out to be cloth. Bingo! It was so good that afterwards I bought two cloth caps. This incident conveniently occurred at that time of year when my swimming suit wears out and starts to droop from my naked breast during the crawl - a definite signal that it's time to replace the suit. I now have fidelity cards at the two main sporting good chains in Paris: Decathlon and Go Sport. If they don't have what I need in one, they'll have it in the other.

Properly goggled and swimsuited, I make my way down the stairs to the now "mixed" men and women showers. At least the showers are hot and strong, although they're on a timer where you have to keep pushing the button for the water to run 45 seconds before the timer goes off. After rinsing off, onward to the pool.

This is where the cultural differences come into play. I challenge you to find a French person who swims in a straight line. It has been my intercultural observation over the years that French space is curved and the national shape is a circle. This means - look out for the woman in the two-piece orange bathing suit swimming a powerful backstroke, in a crowded pool, "curving" right into "your" lane. As an Anglo-American, my space is linear and my "cultural shape" is a square. Despite this handicap in France, I'm very proud to report that to compensate, I have developed a new intercultural skill. I calmly, yet firmly, push the two-piece swimming suited woman's head out of my path when she butts into me. So far, it's worked every time. No problem, a quick "pardon", etc. This is in contrast to the time in Hungary when a very fat Hungarian man almost killed me. You see, he kept walking in front of me while I was trying to swim laps. OK, I guess I was in kind of a French mode, so I gave him just a wee bit of a nip (a really, really small kick). He then pulled me over and started yelling at me in Hungarian. I somehow managed to escape being murdered in the Hotel Gellert swimming pool in Budapest, thereby avoiding an international incident.

I'm also very adept now at swimming around the person who is trying to take over "my" lane, then regaining "my" lane and taking it over again myself. This usually works except with large, aggressive fast-swimming males. I'm also very adept at swimming through really narrow spaces between two people coming at me from the opposite direction. Just boogy on through, what matters a petite bump or two.

Usually, the municipal pools are closed on national holidays. Naturally, for the last national holiday, they decided to open without informing anyone. Since I'm a regular and therefore have a "pipeline" ("tuyau") to the pool, in fact, I suspected that they would be open on this particular national holiday since they had been open on several other national holidays before without formal notice. If this sounds complicated, it is. Isn't life more interesting when it's complicated? Anyway, I took my chance, the pool was open, and hardly anyone was there since normally it would have been closed.

So, having learned to swim in curves, as the French do, I successfully navigate my thirty minutes of non-stop lap swimming in a clean, well-maintained pool. Then, it's back through the shower, where I recently met Marcelle. We were both commiserating each other about the stupidity of the mixed showers when she asked me about my "petit accent". I told her that I was American, and she responded in perfect English! It seems that just during and after World War II she lived Kentucky, and her sister still lives there. She's another "regular". Plus, Anne, the really nice, friendly Chinese lady, and her husband. They have a shoe repair shop on a pedestrian street near my place where I take all my shoes to be repaired, of course. Apparently he was a computer technician in China (this is the scoop from Léon who knows just about all the regulars at the pool).

After the mixed shower, it's back on up the stairs to get my basket with my clothes from the locker, then on to the changing room. I always try for a double. Most of the changing rooms are pigeon holes, except for two which are — double. My "old" American self would have prevented me from using up so much space when it could be used by, say, a family. My "new" French self says, "It's free, take it. So nice to have so much space. The others will just have to wait or use a smaller space – "tant pis" (tough tiddly winks). Voilà."

In the changing room I get to use the great shampoos and skin creams that I have found over the years in parapharmacies and a great shop called Plantaderm, all listed and explained in my Shopping E-Book. Then, it's time to turn in the empty basket and say goodbye to the "guys" behind the counter. After that, it's hair dry time. Here you get to choose between two hot air hand dryers (you know, the kind they use in bathrooms?) mounted on the wall. Sometimes they work. Sometimes not. One of them was mounted for French giants to dry their hair, I kid you not. It must be at least seven feet off the ground (OK, maybe six and a half). Luckily, the other one is normal, and I feel lucky when it's free since I'm neither French nor a giant.

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And then, I leave my beloved Piscine Hébert, refreshed, renewed and ready to start another day in Paris.

Last Summer, the same French bureaucrat ("fonctionnaire") decided to make swimming more "fun" during the summer by creating summer hours for selected pools so they could stay open later in the evening. However, this also meant opening later, at 11 am instead of 8 am. Wouldn't you know that the Piscine Hébert's summer hours turned out to begin at 11 am weekdays and 9 am Sundays, much too late for an earlybird swimmer like me. It also meant it would be impossible to avoid scads of children paddling crossways in front of the lap swimmers - like me. So, using my well-developed French survival skills, I decided to go to my backup pool, Piscine des Amiraux, 2 metro stops away. It had earlybird hours all summer, and I actually like the pool better than Hébert. But their cold to tepid showers only last about 5 seconds!

It was just before the end of summer, and I still had one more time at Des Amiraux. I arrived there Sunday morning for my swim, only to be greeted by that ubiquitous sign that pops up with regularity in France: "Greve" (strike). The lifeguards were on strike. Pool closed. Go away. Come again some other day. At this point, I don't get mad anymore. I rely on my French "have a backup plan and be Zen" attitude towards life. Hey – you never know what's going to happen. Go with the flow.

"Hmmm. They didn't say if the greve was city wide or wildcat, so I'm just going to check out Hébert and see if they're on strike too." Usually it's everyone, but since in France you never know, - it always pays to check things out. I took the Metro back to my home stop and dropped by my good old neighborhood pool. It was obviously not open yet, but on the other hand, no "greve" signs either. Not having my watch on, I decided to walk home (a three-minute walk) and then called the Piscine Hébert.

"Are you open, or are you on strike?"

What strike? We're open normal hours from 9 to 5:30."

OK! Let's swim! At the end of my laps, I couldn't resist asking one of the lifeguards at Hébert if he knew anything about the strike at Amiraux. Nada. "Well, you know we want to be more involved with the schools planning swim classes for the kids. Maybe Amiraux was on strike just for one hour."

Uh huh. Right.

Needless to say, after my summer adventures, things returned to normal in September, and I am now happily swimming laps at the Piscine Hébert (until the next weird thing that happens).

THE HAIRCUT

It was time for a haircut. When I first arrived in Paris, I felt I had to take advantage of the best of everything. I often ended up traveling long distances to find that special coiffeur. After a few years, I'd simply had it with slogging around in the Metro. I made the decision to simplify my life by finding services in my very own neighborhood. I began to check out the local hair salons. But it was hard going, as many coiffeurs are around 17 years old (ok, ok, early 20's but they look 17), and they are scared of thick hair. You see, I have the "Feldman" hair. Thick and coarse. One "17-year-old" hairdresser thinned my hair so much that even though I received complements on the cut, I felt bald – because it was thinned so much. I guess thick hair must be controlled by thinning it into thin hair.

Finally, I thought I had found the very best coiffure in Paris – the owner of a very chic salon on the Rue Faubourg Saint Honoré. Although he thinned my hair, it wasn't too much, and he gave me a great haircut. Unfortunately, he didn't like me. I think maybe because I didn't come in often enough, but I'm not even sure about that. One evening I arrived at the salon on my way home from work, only to find that he wasn't there because he was "sick." I allowed the salon manager to cut my hair. Big mistake. He wasn't as good, but salons in France are very political. Once you change, you can't go back! So I stopped going. This increased my determination to find something equally as good, some undiscovered genius, in my very own neighborhood. After all, this is Paris! I continued my search of local salons with little success.

One day, it came to me. At the swimming pool! While I was speaking to Marcelle, I must have admired her haircut. "Why, I get it cut on your street – it's the daughter of a friend of mine." "What?" I certainly didn't remember seeing a hairdresser on my street. "Why, yes – she took over her father's barber shop, next to the long distance phone service." Sure enough – I had never noticed it. On the sign outside, it said (and still says) "Messieurs" i.e. "Men". It had simply not registered and I had never really looked inside. Because inside was Veronique Garcia, coiffeuse extraordinaire. There she was, and had been, 30 seconds from where I lived on my own street! The best haircut ever. And right in the 'hood.

MOMO AND THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Although not everyone in France is a friend, you still have to enter into some kind of relationship to get past the poker face stage. Once you've established your network, daily life can become rather pleasant indeed. Which is why I enjoy living in the 'hood.

Since life in France is also about the romance of the ordinary, this includes flirting, which in France is an art. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "to flirt" as "to behave amorously without serious intent". I would agree with that. "It is behavior that is enjoyable in itself with no specific object." I would agree with that too. So I flirt in France. This is pretty good for the girl voted the "most intellectual" of her graduating high school class in New Jersey. I flirt with the guy who sells cheese in the covered market. And I flirted with Momo.

Momo is Moroccan. Momo is short for Mohammed. Momo is the owner, chef, chief cook and bottle washer of a small fast food restaurant on the pedestrian shopping street running along the covered market. When you enter the restaurant and Momo holds out his arms, and then kisses you four times on the cheek (instead of the usual two for Paris), your day is made! He is intelligent and – he listens! (Are you hearing this, guys?). This even makes up for times when I am busy having my flirt/discussion and some other woman rushes into the restaurant, crying, "Momo!" And he leaves to flirt with her. That done he returns to me. He is such an artist that I don't even mind. So I'll read my book while he flirts with her (one advantage of being intellectual).

Momo has an interesting story. He left Morocco in 1965. By 1971 he was traveling the Silk Route in the mountains that connect Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan. Basically he bought and sold carpets. When Khomeini returned to Iran in 1979, everything fell apart and he fled to France with nothing. Once in France, he started a variety of small businesses including selling carpets at the Flea Market and buying small restaurants, renovating them, building up a clientele and then selling said restaurants. This is what he was up to on our pedestrian street. And, there were regulars. People who came in to sip a coffee and shoot the breeze. It was really a small haven.

Momo also has a black belt in Judo. I discovered this indirectly when, after an unexplained absence from the restaurant, he returned with a bruise on his face. It seems that three kids made the mistake of attacking him behind the restaurant. Two of three ended up in the hospital.

I must recount one episode here to illustrate the "villageness" of it all. I happen to like rock'n'roll. Heavy metal to be exact, and one of my favorite groups is Def Leppard. One day, on a complete whim, I brought my Def Leppard Hysteria CD for Momo to hear in his

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restaurant. After all, we had discussed the fact that he loved jazz and listened to the French all-jazz radio station. It just so happened that after Momo (a common nickname for Mohammed) put it on his sound system, another Mohammed walked in the door. Mohammed 2 was one of the regulars at the restaurant and is also from Morocco. But instead of looking like a Berber horseman/karate black belt (Mohammed 1), he looks like Omar Sharif used to look like when he was young (i.e. handsome sheik look). So – you've got Mohammed 1 talking to Mohammed 2 in Arabic with Def Leppard Hysteria rocking in the background, and me watching the whole scene. Wow – this is the "real" Paris of the 21st century!

After flirting with Momo for about 6 months, including "faire la bise" (i.e. the cheek kissing) four times instead of two, discussions and free cups of coffee or mint tea - a North African specialty – I noticed that the main wall in the restaurant was empty.

I love to take photographs. I've been doing it for years. Friends tell me they are really good, but what to do more than that?

"Hey, Momo, would you like some photos to hang on your wall?"

"Maybe."

We agreed that I would show him some samples – and he liked my shots of the doors of Paris, plus a few of railroads. Later I added Toys'r'Us in Manhattan, pumpkins in New Jersey – you know, the usual subjects you would expect in a Greek sandwich place in an immigrant neighborhood in Paris.

Next I had to get the enlargements done. Where to go? The big lab where I have my films developed does really crummy work on enlargements. Then I discovered Monsieur Clotaire Folfack. M Folfack comes originally from the Cameroon in Africa. And he has an independent photo lab where he develops and prints to order. His prices are the same as, or less than, the big lab. He is located only two Metro stops away. M. Folfack is an artist.

Then came the question of how to frame them. I decided to visit my favorite hardware store in Paris, Leroy Merlin, for glass mounts. I was very happy when Leroy moved to Paris a few years ago because I had been boycotting BHV. BHV is one of the major department stores in Paris and is "the" place for hardware. They have everything in their basement. But, the sales staff is about the most miserable I had ever encountered. (Actually they're better now, so I suppose I ought to re-consider my boycott.) Anyway, I usually find just about everything I need at Leroy Merlin. Being a French version of Home Depot, they are a mixture of utilitarian ugly and French style. I did indeed find the

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glass mounts I needed and in large quantities. Then came the mounting itself, using lots of Windex (yes, you can get Windex in France), and putting plastic twine on the backs.

Finally we hung them. My very own "expo-vente" (exhibition-sale). They looked good. I didn't know if many (or any) would sell given the location and neighborhood. But it felt good to have accomplished something that I had imagined and which then became reality. My photographs, on display, in Momo's restaurant.

P.S. After I wrote the above article, I went on vacation to the U.S. for two weeks last summer. When I returned to Paris, Momo had disappeared! The restaurant was closed and shuttered, with only a sign posted saying "Fermé suite à une panne", a very vague phrase meaning, "Closed after something broke down." It is now Spring and the Koq Kabab is still closed. No sign of Momo. At first I asked all the merchants around if they knew what had happened. No one did. I left several messages on Momo's cell phone, which was still functioning but which he never answered. No response. I remembered he had ordered special rolls for his sandwiches, so I asked at the Muslim bakery around the corner. The young man didn't know anything either, but he did tell me the name and location of the owner of the entire building. Mr. Larbi. Unfortunately, Mr. Larbi turned out to be a crooked old man whose main concern was how to be grouchy and mean. I was beginning to wonder if Momo had been dealing with the Mafia and had fled to Marocco to escape. Or maybe tax troubles? Finally, I saw Mohammed (Omar Sharif looking) walking down the street. When I asked him what had happened to Momo, he replied that Momo had simply abandoned the restaurant in Paris to focus on creating a large store in Montreuil, a suburb just outside Paris where Momo lives. He had seen him just last week. We'll see what happens. The restaurant is still closed with my photos locked inside. So far no trace of Momo. I check the outside of Koq Kabab on a regular basis – one day I hope to see something.

3: OUTSIDE MY NEIGHBORHOOD

SATURDAY MORNING IN THE WAREHOUSE

The highlight of the day was definitely when I pulled off my top in the middle of the warehouse and stood there in my bra and pants. My French friend Evelyne held my bag, purse and glasses. There were a few guys around, but I didn't care. Neither did they.

In fact, the above incident occurred quite within the normal course of events - at the bi-annual Bensimon private warehouse sale! Bensimon is a French ready-to-wear designer fashion brand with sober, clean-lined designs made out of the highest quality fabric.

I was not alone in stripping off my top (or bottom) to try something on in the huge, ugly warehouse, containing aisles and aisles of Bensimon clothes and a few mirrors. But in no way was there ever going to be a changing room. Ergo, if you wanted to try something on, "just do it in the aisle," so to speak. When I look at the knit tops in my closet now, they are almost all Bensimon, bought over the past years (at the bi-annual private warehouse sales, of course!), and I wear one Bensimon item, almost every day. You can find out more about Bensimon in my E-Book on Shopping, including how to find the only discount outlet for this brand in the Paris area.

My friend Evelyne and I consider these private sales to be a bi-annual religious pilgrimage. God forbid we are ever dropped from the mailing list! You must be on their mailing list to receive your printed invitation, which absolutely MUST be handed in at the door (no exceptions) in order to be admitted, and you are allowed to bring along only one other person. It's pretty obvious that a lot of French women have been bringing their friends, as Evelyne and I have seen the numbers grow to the point that it's not even worth coming Saturday afternoon - you literally cannot move down the aisles. Which is why we made our appointment for Saturday morning at 10:30 am.

I had first heard about these sales, (every November/December and June/July) several years ago from Evelyne. She had heard about them from a friend of hers in public relations who was invited to a lot of private clothing sales. In fact, if you can get on private sale lists, usually reserved for journalists, it's the best way to find fashion bargains in Paris.

Evelyne is a French person who is on time. I, the American, usually rush in late and out of breath. The night before our Saturday morning appointment, I had had insomnia. When that happens, I like to sit and work at my computer at 4 in the morning until I feel tired, and then go back to bed. Unfortunately, this also meant that on this particular

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Saturday I got up at 9 am - and I had to leave my apartment by 10 at the latest to make our rendezvous. Which meant eating my breakfast out of plastic containers in the Metro. It's worth it for Bensimon! Fortunately for me, while in the Metro waiting for my train, I had a call from Evelyne on my cell phone. For once, she was running late too. So I was saved this time and could travel with less guilt.

At the sale, Evelyne and I helped each other rummage through piles of clothing. We examined multitudes of jackets and pants hanging on racks and, bien sûr, held each other's clothes while we each in turn stripped down in the aisle to try something on. I really lucked out this time. It was Evelyne who pointed out a rack of all-wool pantsuits that were going for 50 € for the entire suit! The pants were a bit too long, but no matter. I could have them altered at the Cambodian dry cleaners. Bargain shoppers will understand my elation - I see myself on my death bed, reviewing my entire life: "But on the plus side is DEFINITELY that gorgeous all-wool Bensimon suit that I bought for only 50 €!"

After the sale, we went home separately since Evelyne, who has more energy than anyone else I know, was entertaining people for lunch. I myself felt satisfied. After a quick pin up to check the length, it was time to take the pants to the Cambodian dry cleaners to be shortened. I left my apartment and walked down the Rue L'Olive shopping street that runs alongside the covered market. At the very end is the drycleaners where they also do alterations. Time, once more to strip off one half of my clothes, this time the bottom, in a corner next to the dry cleaning machine, so I could show them the pants. I was told that I could get my pants back "dans le courant de la semaine prochaine" or "sometime next week - we're not really sure." "Sure, fine, no problem."

On my way back to my apartment, I stopped off at the North African telephone place, just down the street from the Cambodian dry cleaners. It was time to do photocopies for a private English class that I teach on Sundays. In a space about the size of a walk-in closet, they have jammed in 6 phone booths where immigrants from all nations can "phone home" to Dakar, Brazzaville, Alger, Istanbul, Bucharest, etc. In the corner near the entryway they have stuck one small photocopy machine with the best rates in the neighborhood. (Why should I pay double at the Chinese photocopy place?) On my way out I bumped into my Senegalese neighbor who is a cook in an African restaurant. We had met in the hallway after a pipe burst in the Chinese apartment across from me, flooding the entire hallway. Anyway, I had promised to visit her restaurant. She gave me the card from the restaurant and then announced to the entire store, "C'est une Américaine" (She's American). Oh boy, this not information I'd like to spread around with this crowd. But, in fact, there was no reaction whatsoever - not even from the guy with the turban at the cash register.

Whew. It was then time to go home to have a quick dinner. Then, out again to use my unlimited cinema card. For a monthly fee of 18 € that is debited automatically, I can see any movie I want at any time. I just have to arrive not more than one hour before the start of the film. So I decided to see the latest Chinese fantasy swordplay film, "Le secret des poignards volants" (The Secret of the Flying Daggers). It was great - I totally enjoyed watching two adorable, handsome Chinese heroes try to slice each other up over the gorgeous, dead (almost) heroine. But the best part of the film was the scene where the entire Chinese army jumped and whished from one bamboo top to another, like a group of Tarzans in warlord dress, flying along in the greenery.

At last - time to go home and to bed. It was the end of another typical Saturday in Paris.

DRAME ON AUTOBUS 31

There is a lot of concern now in France about "*l'insécurité*".

When I first moved in Paris, I never heard of anyone being attacked. I will admit that there always has been, and still is, a lot of thievery here -- it's better to have a purse with flaps and to keep track of your luggage and packages placed on the ground. In fact, I never leave my purse on the ground anymore after having one stolen that way in 1991. But violence was never an issue.

It seems to me there are some big problems coming down the road from the *banlieus* where the disaffected kids of immigrants live in housing projects called *HLM's* in a kind of nightmare setting. I've seen some of them, and they are just as bad as described. I've also heard stories about what it's like to live in those neighborhoods and suffer the type of violence and aggression most Americans associate with the inner city. On the one hand, these kids were raised in France; they know that they have rights, but are discriminated against in a really blatant way. You'd be mad too. I certainly hope that the new French government will work to end the discrimination against and the isolation of these outlying communities, or the problem will only get worse. "*A voir*," as they say.

But sometimes Paris is still Paris and small miracles take place when you least expect them.

Several months ago I was visiting a friend who lives near the Champs Elysees in a lovely upscale neighborhood, to say the least. One way for me to return home is to take *Autobus* 31 which starts near the Champs and then makes its way east across the northern neighborhoods of Paris which are far from posh -- like mine. In fact, I often return home alone quite late at night, and it's fine. And I feel safer there after dark than I did in Santa Monica, California, where I lived just before I moved to Paris. It's ironic to

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think of Santa Monica, so upper middle class, feeling more dangerous than the poor immigrant neighborhood where I live now.

That evening I boarded *Autobus* 31 on Avenue de Friedland near Etoile. The 31 is a sort of double bus--2 busses connected in the middle by an accordion-like seal. I seated myself in the back and settled myself in for the uneventful ride home. Several stops later I noticed a short, middle-aged, "white" Frenchman, gripping the support pole that runs from the floor to the ceiling of the bus, as if his life depended on it. From the vacant expression in his eyes and the blank expression on his face, I concluded that he was just a bit mentally handicapped. I watched, fascinated, as he gripped the pole, standing rigidly in the middle of the aisle so that each passenger had to ask him to step aside whenever they went from the door of the bus to take their seat in the rear, or vice versa.

By the middle of the route, the bus was quite full, mostly with people from the non-posh neighborhoods we were passing through. Suddenly, a young North African man in the front of the bus, kind of scraggly looking, started shouting at the top of his lungs as he lurched towards the back of the bus. What he was shouting was that the man clutching the pole was a bastard, how dare he block the aisle like that and that he would beat him to a pulp right there and then -- again. I think the little gray-haired, and now wild-eyed man almost stopped breathing he was so scared--you could feel his fear. I was sitting right next to him -- he was really was really gripping the bus pole. As the young North African kept advancing, shouting and gesticulating towards the back of the bus, the unexpected happened.

As I said, we had picked up a lot of passengers from the poor neighborhoods we had passed through. Many of these passengers were African. They went into action. I don't think they knew each other, but they were so coordinated it seemed as if they did. Two or three guys, about twice as tall and wide as the potential attacker, approached him and talked to him as they politely, but firmly, pushed him towards the middle of the bus. Then, somehow, they forced him off the bus at the next stop! Several others gently pushed the handicapped man further towards the rear of the bus, got him seated and then several women sat next to him, talking to him quietly and calming him down. *Voilà*. Welcome to Paris. Thus was violence averted.

The most irritating thing was that I was so drawn into this *drame*, I missed my stop and had to backtrack a good ways to get home! But, OK, it was worth it and a small price to pay to see strangers group together in order to protect the weak and prevent violence. And this is not the first time I've seen it happen in Paris. In the end, I suppose we were all lucky that the young North African man was not carrying a gun.

LA MONTAGNE SAINTE-GENEVIÈVE

November 1 and 11 are holidays in France. November is not as good as May, but after all, in May you get up to 4 paid holidays. It's not a sure thing since the Catholic holidays related to Easter are, in the end, tied to the Jewish lunar calendar. So the date changes from year to year. But in May you've got at least May 1, May 8 and Ascension. Pentecost sometimes falls in May, sometimes in early June. I'm not complaining.

This November 11, I had planned to do a walking tour that had been written up in my weekly arts and television guide, *Télérama*. I call *Télérama* an "only in France" publication. By this I mean it's an ultra left-wing socialist, ultra progressive television guide, published by the Catholic Press (it's hard to imagine the Catholic Church in the U.S. ever publishing a magazine with art photos displaying nude female breasts), that basically tells you why you should not watch television. It's an institution and *très intello*. I "religiously" follow the film reviews and by now have learned to decipher the codes. "This is an American, superficial, overly sentimental film" ("Wow, this sounds wonderful, funny and sincere."). Or, "what an insightful study of the dark psychology of a tortured soul" ("Good Lord, you couldn't pay me to see this artsy fartsy pretentious film."). I subscribe to *Télérama* and eagerly await each issue.

At any rate, I wanted to follow their guided tour of the 5th arrondissement, covering an area with history dating from Roman through Medieval times. It was written in true French for the French style. What this means is that the bare essentials are given, but "you're supposed to know" all the background and/or fill in all the gaps yourself. Thank goodness I have a detailed map of Paris - one of those booklet things that has one or two pages for each arrondissement and is for sale at any Monoprix in Paris. Using that, I assiduously read the tour and added in the missing details and directions.

I took the Metro to Cluny where the walking tour began, bright and eager, on a beautiful fall day, and looking forward to a two-hour walk immersed in the past. Here's how the tour went, including the missing "details" not mentioned in *Télérama*!

At Cluny, the tour begins with the remains of Roman thermal baths just outside the Museum of the Middle Ages on Boulevard St Michel. After you exit from the Metro, walk alongside the Museum on the Boulevard Saint Michel up to Rue du Sommerard to get the best view. Then walk back down to Boulevard Saint Germain, turn right and walk down the boulevard Saint Germain as it goes alongside the Museum's medieval garden, planted fairly recently using graphic and written references to flowers and plants of that period.

Continue to the Metro Maubert where you will find the Rue de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, and turn right onto this street. This is one of those Parisian streets that has not changed much since the Middle Ages. At the top is a small, hidden square facing the garden of the former Ecole Polytechnique, which was the most prestigious of the Grandes Ecoles ("great schools") founded by Napoleon I in 1794 to train France's future engineers. The school was transferred to the southern suburbs of Paris in 1977.

There take the Rue Descartes. At No. 11, you can enter the grounds of the former Ecole Polytechnique which are now a garden and park. Continue along the Rue Descartes, and turn left onto the Rue Clovis. Further down the Rue Clovis are the remains of Philippe Auguste's protective wall that encircled Paris in the 12th century. Very chunky and medieval looking.

Turn left at Rue Cardinal-Lemoine, and at the Metro of the same name turn right onto Rue Monge. Down this street, at No. 149 on the left side, is an entrance to the Arènes de Lutèce – the remains of a Roman arena that seated between 10-15,000, people all gathered together to enjoy gladiator fights and/or dramatic spectacles. Cross to the other side other side of the arena, and you'll see another exit on your right. After you exit, turn right onto the Rue Navarre and walk to where it ends at the Rue Monge. The steps going up on the other side Rue Monge is the Rue Rollin. After the climb, you're on a pedestrian street that, like Rue de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, has basically remained unchanged since the Middle Ages. René Descartes used to live at No. 14 (which has a very impressive door).

At the end of Rue Rollin is the Place de la Contrescarpe. The name goes back to the Middle Ages when one of the gates in Philippe Auguste's wall around Paris stood just beyond the Place. Outside the wall was a moat that rose to another earthen wall or counter escarpment, thus the name. I love to imagine those days when the area on the other side of the moat was a no-man's land, and even the square was dark and dangerous at night. It's rather amusing when you look at the Place today – one of the safest, most charming and touristy areas in Paris.

From the Place de la Contrescarpe, take the Rue Blainville, then the Rue l'Estrapade and you'll find yourself in the middle of a labyrinth of streets where medieval scholars once held sway.

Turn right on the Rue Clotilde that runs along the Lycée Henri IV, built in what was once the powerful royal Abbey Sainte-Geneviève, founded by Clovis himself. At the summit of the hill is the imposing mass of the Pantheon, originally meant to be the new church of the Abbey. Commissioned by Louis XV in 1744, it took so long to build that it was completed just before the Revolution and was then co-opted to honor "Great Men."

Continue on Rue Clotilde to the Eglise Saint-Etienne-du-Mont on your right. After the severity of the other buildings, it's fun to stare at the over-the-top Renaissance facade of this church. Inside, among other treasures, are a reliquary of Sainte Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris, containing a fragment of her sarcophagus, and the only rood screen in Paris.

Then look for the Rue Soufflot which you can find quite easily by circling around since it's the widest street leading from the Pantheon. But before you turn right onto this street, take a minute to admire the facades of the Mairie (town hall) of the 5th arrondissement and the Faculté de Droit. They create an imposing symmetry opposite the Library Sainte-Geneviève where thousands of books and manuscripts from the former abbey have been preserved.

Take the Rue Soufflot which cuts across the Rue Saint Jacques, the ancient Roman road leading north-south. Turn right on the Rue Saint Jacques (with a beautiful view of the green dome of the Sorbonne) and then an immediate left on the Rue Cujas, the main east-west street in Roman times. It was at this crossroads that once stood the Forum of Lutetia, or Roman Paris. Just before you reach the boulevard Saint Michel turn right onto the Rue Victor Cousin, then left into the monumental square bordered on one end by the Sorbonne Chapel. At the other end of the square is the boulevard Saint Michel with the Jardin du Luxembourg on the other side of the street, to the left

At the end of our tour, I realized once again what a long and complex history lies just before our eyes in Paris. It reveals itself when we really take the time to look at it.

BIO

I had always dreamed of living in France (for no logical reason). Finally, after giving up hope of ever achieving this dream, I was offered a job in Paris, giving me the opportunity to live and work in France for a minimum of five years. I must say that the move from Los Angeles to Paris was the easiest move I have ever made in a series of "big moves" throughout my life. I grew up in New Jersey and moved to Michigan and then to Northern California to go to university. After that I moved to Southern California where I worked in non-fiction video distribution.

After the move to France, once the honeymoon period was over, it was tough. I had to learn how to deal with a completely different way of life and ways of thinking. In fact, I had never felt so uprooted in my life. I learned that the process of putting down roots in "foreign" soil definitely does not take place overnight, but I had to do it or give up my dream. In the end, I found that I was rather well-equipped to handle this challenge because I had always lived several cultures – my parents were both born in Austria, so I had always felt a bit "European" in America. It was only after living in France that I discovered how "American" I was! I am happy to say that sixteen years later, I am still living and working in France.

Since I am now in between two cultures, I can put that experience to use for others. I discovered that you really have to develop the ability to step back and examine the most basic values of your life. Values that you thought were universal turn out to be cultural. It's only once you begin to see from another vantage point that that you can take advantage of living and experiencing two different cultures.

It still constantly amazes me how even all the "little things" are different in France!