

Les Bouquinistes

Le Marais, present day

A good start this morning. Finally got the knack of the rusty key and the weird upwards door handle to lock the apartment! Those stairs are dark and a bit creepy, but the hallway has some exquisite old patterned tiles. There's a pungent smell of newly mopped wet disinfectant coming from the basement, so I don't linger inside. The massive wooden blue door clunks shut behind and a bright Paris Spring morning is right here waiting just for me. A skip in my stride. Sparrows are chirruping in the trees and a very old man is strolling along the edge of the pavement. I can smell the sweet yet acrid aroma of his cigarette smoke, his funny little bulldog plods along behind him. Mouth-watering smells of baking as I pass the boulangerie and to a table at my "local" café. Dazzling reflections of polished zinc, aromas of freshly ground coffee masking traffic fumes and Paris drains. My new suede boots, impractical heels I know, but hey I'm walking the streets of Paris (how do these French women walk everywhere in heels?), and my new scarf, Longchamp...over one hundred Euros, ouch, but to die for and I deserve it, right? I feel good. I sip my coffee. I pretend to read *Le Figaro*. I'm in France. I'm fifty years old, but I feel alive. It's all going to be OK.

That was just this morning, so what changed? It's like slipping or skating from one kind of consciousness to another. What seemed rock solid now feels fragile.

I wanted to see the bouquinistes. You can't go to Paris and not see the bouquinistes, they said. Even Luke had been to them (without me, on his "business" trip, but was it all business? Ha!) and anyway what does he know of books if they're not about software and new business paradigms?

Maybe I should not have Googled 'Paris bouquinistes' before I set off. You know, I think sometimes knowledge gets in the way. I mean, they've been here for literally centuries, since before the revolution even. It's humbling. And it is so picturesque with the quay and the river and their old green stalls and all the book covers and the characters...it's pure theatre. But thanks to the great God Internet, I had pre-conceptions, and they got in the way of my appreciation. Then I tried to take a picture and the vendor got shirty with me. 'No photos' he said, tut-tutting at me. What's his problem? So then I figured I was just being a cheap tourist and I should put the camera away and just like, take it all in. And you know what? He did

me a favour with his “No photos” rule. I relaxed. I loved it.

Diane, you would love it too – all these fabulous vintage novels and Vogue covers and old comic book posters. There’s this smell of old paper and musty leather, like the books you once found in your grandpa’s attic. Some of the sellers are real types, they have this haughty attitude, sitting smoking Gauloises and generally ignoring the browsers. And guess what? You know Charlie is studying French literature...well I found an early volume of Proust, part of *La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, not leather, but a treasure of a hardback with gorgeous marbled inners and gilded edges. Sixty-five euros! *Mon dieu!* He probably ripped me off but who cares. So, I’m browsing in this one stall. You know how browsing books and vinyl records is one of those things that you do, and you can just lose yourself in it? Anyway, I become aware of this guy glancing at me and he says something like ‘I *lurve* zee old books’, but with a smoochy French accent of course! What is it with that accent!?

Who am I talking to? Diane? Myself? My conscience? But I want to hold this thought for a while because, because he was good looking with his leather coat and his scarf. Only the French men can get away with the scarf like that and seem cool. And he had a kind of quiet, honest confidence, a weathered face and bright eyes.

I get my phone out – time to share a moment. Hey all! As you can see, I’m here, it’s me, *finalement* in Paris. This bridge is called the Petit Pont right next to Notre-Dame. What do you think of my scarf?! *Tres chic n'est ce-pas?* SEND.

My heart feels kind of achy - a disconcerting swell of ambiguous feelings. There’s a light breeze but you wouldn’t call it a breeze, it’s a waft. It seems to be carried by the river. What does it smell like? What would Proust say? Old wet stone, river weed and a touch of marine diesel? No matter, cos the air comes alive just for me, funnelling under the bridges and rippling over the waves. I let it cool my neck, pushing up my hair. Get those Hepburn shades on, a hair flick, a wry smile, is that the Louvre in the background? Look at you, Little Miss Independent. Click, send to Maisy, Diane, Cal, Charlie, who else? Send to Luke? Tempting – check me out huh? I’m doing just fine, so suck it up. No, cheap shot. Don’t send to Luke.

They’re waving from the boat as they slide right under where I stand, happy couples, tourists, so many cameras and phones. Does anyone come here and just look at stuff with their eyes anymore? What do they take home from Paris? Three thousand image files to gather dust on a digital cloud? But I’m here, I’m looking at it straight, unfiltered. It’s Paris, these big white clouds framing the towers of Notre-Dame, this precious stone bridge, and buzzing along the embankment near me is a cool guy riding a funky scooter-bike and he’s wearing a black business suit, aviator shades and a retro helmet. Maybe he’s going to a meeting at a creative agency, he’s going to jump off his bike and stride into the board-room, taking off his shades, straightening his tie; ‘Salut, Salut’, purposeful handshakes all round.

Thinking about men, again. Motorbike guy is not for me. Monsieur Le Scarf is more my

type. I'm smiling at the clouds now. It was charming, our little conversation. His eyes were kind, with a hint of naughtiness. When did anyone last charm me? A *frisson* is what I felt, a little French word that fluttered inside me and stirred the memory of desire. Admit it. How thrilling it would be to meet someone here, in Paris, to have a little affair of the heart, an *amour*. Not to seek it out but just to be open to the possibility. That someone else might take control and all I need to do is to react, all decisions made, all responsibility assumed.

Did I always have these conversations with myself? Of course, of course. I just never noticed before. I suppose I was too busy ticking things off my list. Looking back, all these predictable stages in my life. And now I'm old enough to just list them right off like the chapter headings of a book. It goes something like:

High school

First dates

Columbia

English and French Lit

Lacrosse

Two serious relationships

Luke

First jobs

An unnecessarily big wedding

Moving to LA

Promotions

Cal, then Charlie

Junior soccer

Lots of baking

Vacations in the Caribbean

Less conversation

Less sex

Less love

Less Luke

Less life?

I don't want those California days anymore, the endless smoggy hazy blue. I want more contrast. I like this dappled life, the *promise* of sunshine, the towering white clouds underlined with grey, seem more real, or is it just a better metaphor? The clouds move west over Paris and the sun pours out a molten wave of golden light that sweeps across the quayside, turns the river into quicksilver – this is how Seurat must have seen it. Sparkling atoms, colour saturated.

This change of light, this impressionist moment. I want to cherish it, to add it to the myriad other moments. Let me focus on it, let me be in the now. But something is niggling. It's like the telling of a dream, you know when you have it in your head as clear as a movie scene and then it just unravels in the telling. Where did it go, why can't I find the words? What is it with me? I'm like that princess in the story, you know, the one about the pea and the pile of mattresses and however comfortable she gets on all those mattresses she can still feel that damned pea. I'm in this sumptuous scene, but there's a little pea rattling in my head. It's been two months since I came off the meds. I didn't want to see Paris in muted tones. I need edges. If it has to be gritty and sharp I'll take it, not like before. Citalopram got me through the worst times. It dulls the pain. I coped. The ugly accusations from his divorce lawyers. The kids' recriminations. What did we say to them: 'You're old enough to understand. You're such great kids, we know you will be OK. We just need to live our own lives now'. So trite, it's embarrassing. You rationalise everything but deep down I know they are still hurting, especially Cal.

On one stall, amongst the paperbacks, the copies of Le Petit Journal and the antique maps I find a tray of vintage postcards. One black and white card catches my eye. A lady in a full length black skirt, Victorian era, is standing at one of the bouquiniste stalls peering intently at the display. Perched on her head is a dainty straw hat like a boater – it probably has coloured ribbons or pattern, but we can't tell. She's carrying a strong looking leather handbag, big enough for a book or two. Behind her, several men, all wearing bowler hats, are reading or just strolling by. One is close to her and leans confidently against the stand - he must be the bouquiniste. Curiously, he is looking at her feet or at the hem of her dress. Maybe he was thinking: 'Is she a buyer or a time-waster?' Or perhaps he was staring furtively at her impressive bosom before the photographer was ready to press the shutter and then he quickly dropped his eyes to the ground beneath her at the crucial moment?

This postcard is . . . what? Ephemera? It is nothing, yet, it tells a story. It is, it was, a moment perhaps with some minor intrigue, laden with delicate possibilities. Here are the trees on the quai above her head, there is the wooden box with its padlocks, just as it is today. There's a glimpse of the Seine and on the far side you can see the grey rooftops of the Île de la Cité. She's got her eye on a volume. But what is it? Or is she aware of the bouquiniste's glance and she has deliberately averted her gaze? She will think 'these book-sellers are scruffy bohemians and how

disarming that he should leer at me'. She is a teacher, she has some standing. In a tall-ceilinged class room smelling of bees-wax floor polish her pupils await their next lesson, but still she idles at the stall. She can't resist a volume of Molière's *École des Femmes*. A few francs are spared from her purse, the volume disappears into her capacious leather bag and the bouquiniste tips his hat, with a little too much of a flourish, she feels. Perhaps she will be reprimanded for being late for her class? They will say 'Madame So and So, this is the third time we have spoken of this matter, it is really too unconscionable!' And it will be Molière's fault. And will she return to the scene of the crime, for a surreptitious second appraisal of the bouquiniste?

Or maybe it was a work by Proust, not Moliere? But that seems unlikely. I don't think Proust was born then, or perhaps he was just born, so his first memories were forming unknowingly before his new-seeing eyes – the colours and scents and sounds of new life. Do babies even know what to think? Are they just in a purity of being?

You need to get away they said. Diane urging me on a literary tour: 'Remember how you were such a book-worm? They have all these European tours for people just like you'. And Maisy, brash as ever: 'Get yourself to Paris girl, go drink too much and let some suave Frenchman take you to bed! You deserve nothing less!' And even the kids, ok a little reluctant at first, but eventually they got bored with my dreams and it was 'For God's sake Mom just go!'

What is it I'm looking for? What is this Paris that will transform me? It is overwhelming. These Monets and Manets, these grand palaces, a self-conscious pause for a café creme at Les Deux Magots, a stroll along the left bank boulevards and a day among the lanes and stairways of Montmartre in search of the ghosts of famous writers and painters. And all I seem to find is a tedious version of me. My threadbare personal history, so predictable and modest it fits on a shopping list, seems to shadow me as I visit these places of pilgrimage. I feel like a jaded tour guide who can't shake off a rag tag trail of unwanted clients.

I must get a grip. Start walking again. Away from the bridge. Back to the apartment? Airbnb came up trumps, even though Jules the owner turned out to be in London. The place is kind of fusty, but he has an incredible library of books, that little balcony is a gem, and the views! I could kick off these heels and take a book outside and just chill. Comforting. But instead I'm heading back to the bouquinistes. Why go back? Because it's the opposite to what my head says I should do? It feels kind of tough and brave anyway. Time to let things go. Admit painfully that, it is, to be completely honest, a pretty slim effort so far, the story of my life. More of a short story than a book. It starts conventionally, with some promise and early pace, but then it becomes a bit stodgy, the prose is unexciting, the plot predictable, and the end? Who knows? But if you happened upon it by chance on a stall here in Paris, well, would you be drawn to open it? Would you read it with curiosity or even with sympathy? Who will care for such unfinished prose one spring day in a hundred years' time? It will probably sit snug in alongside the cheaper paperbacks, with their lurid covers promising romance and adventure, until eventually the pages

will become faded and begin to tear away. But until then, consider the wider company it will keep on this book-lined quay-side! Latin poets, Ecclesiastical treatises, vintage celebrity magazines, comic book superheroes, penny romances, old newspapers reporting victories and defeats on long grubbed up battlefields, leather bound volumes of Descartes, Stein, Pound, Zola, Baudelaire. All these authors, all these scribblers, all dead. Au revoir petit livre!

Message to Diane, doyenne of the reading group: ‘Starting a new chapter!’, with a selfie of me in front of the bouquinistes. SEND. She will understand.

I walk away, anywhere. Across the avenue into the flower market. Heady scent of hyacinths, branches of lilac arching over the stalls and the reflections of clouds in the silvery puddles of discarded flower water. I buy some pink tulips for my kitchen table. Outside the market there’s a pavement café with a chalkboard and ironwork tables. At one of the tables I notice Monsieur Le Scarf. With one hand he slowly stirs a coffee and with the other he is holding open a paperback which he reads intently.

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