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My Life in France

Julia Child with
Alex Prud'homme

My Life in France

Julia Child

WITH ALEX PRUD'HOMME

ALFRED A. KNOFF

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To Paul

FOREWORD

IN AUGUST 2004, Julia Child and I sat in her small, lush garden in Montecito, California, talking about her life. She was thin and a bit stooped, but more vigorous than she'd been in weeks. We were in the midst of writing this book together. When I asked her what she remembered about Paris in the 1950s, she recalled that she had learned to cook everything from snails to wild boar at the Cordon Bleu; that marketing in France had taught her the value of "*les human relations*"; she lamented that in her day the American housewife had to juggle cooking the soup and boiling the diapers—adding, "if she had mixed the two together, imagine what a lovely combination that would make!"

The idea for *My Life in France* had been gestating since 1969, when her husband, Paul, sifted through hundreds of letters that he and Julia had written his twin brother, Charles Child (my grandfather), from France in 1948–1954. Paul suggested creating a book from the letters about their favorite, formative years together. But for one reason or another, the book never got written. Paul died in 1994, aged ninety-two. Yet Julia never gave up on the idea, and would often talk about her intention to write "the France book." She saw it, in part, as a tribute to her husband, the man who had swept her off to Paris in the first place.

I was a professional writer, and had long wanted to work on a collaborative project with Julia. But she was self-reliant, and for years had politely resisted the idea. In December 2003, she once again mentioned "the France book," in a wistful tone, and I again offered to assist her. She was ninety-one and her health had been waxing and waning. This time she said, "All right, dearie, maybe we *should* work on it together."

My job was simply to help Julia tell her story, but it wasn't always easy. Though she was a natural performer, she was essentially a private person who didn't like to reveal herself. We started slowly, began to work in sync, and eventually built a wonderfully productive routine. For a few days every month, I'd sit in her living room asking questions, reading from family letters, and listening to her stories. At first I taped our conversations, but when she began to poke my tape recorder with her long fingers, I realized it was distracting her, and took notes instead. The longer we talked about "little old France," the more she remembered, often with vivid intensity—"Ooh, those lovely roasted, buttered French chickens, they were so good and *chickeny*!"

Many of our best conversations took place over a meal, on a car ride, or during a visit to a farmer's market. Something would trigger a memory, and she'd suddenly tell me about how she learned to make baguettes in Paris, or bouillabaisse in Marseille, or how to survive a French dinner party—"Just speak very loudly and quickly, and state your position with utter conviction, as the French do, and you'll have a marvelous time!"

Almost all of the words in these pages are Julia's or Paul's. But this is not a scholarly work, and

times I have blended their voices. Julia encouraged this approach, pointing out that she and Paul often signed their letters “PJ” or “Pulia,” as if they were two halves of one person. I wrote some of the exposition and transitions, and in so doing tried to emulate Julia’s idiosyncratic word choice—“Plop!,” “Yuck!,” “Woe!,” “Hooray!” Once I had gathered enough material, I would write up a vignette; she would avidly read it, correct my French, and add things as they occurred to her in small, rightward-slanting handwriting. She loved this process, and was an exacting editor. “This book energizes me!” she declared.

Julia and I shared a sense of humor, and appetite, and she thought I looked like Paul, which probably helped our collaboration. As for me, I was grateful for the chance to reconnect with her and to be part of such an interesting project. Some writers find that the more they learn about their co-authors the less they like them, but I had the opposite experience: the more I learned about Julia Child the more I came to respect her. What impressed me most was how hard she worked, how devoted she was to the “rules” of *la cuisine française* while keeping herself open to creative exploration, and how determined she was to persevere in the face of setbacks. Julia never lost her sense of wonder and inquisitiveness. She was, and is, a great inspiration.

Another great inspiration has been our editor, Judith Jones, who worked with Julia for more than forty years. With patience and a deep understanding of our subject, she was indispensable in helping to shape this book. Judith’s assistant, Ken Schneider, was also a great help.

On August 13, 2004—just after our conversation in her garden, and only two days before her ninety-second birthday—Julia died of kidney failure in her sleep. Over the next year, I finished *My Life in France*, but every day wished I could call her up and ask her to clarify a story, or to share a bit of news, or just to talk. I miss her. But through her words in these pages, Julia’s voice remains as lively, wise, and encouraging as ever. As she would say, “We had such fun!”

Alex Prud’homme
August 2005



Me in the middle, surrounded by my brother, John, and younger sister, Dorothy

Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK about some of the things I have loved most in life: my husband, Paul Child; *la belle France*; and the many pleasures of cooking and eating. It is also something new for me. Rather than a collection of recipes, I've put together a series of linked autobiographical stories, mostly focused on the years 1948 through 1954, when we lived in Paris and Marseille, and also a few of our later adventures in Provence. Those early years in France were among the best of my life. They marked a crucial period of transformation in which I found my true calling, experienced an awakening of the senses, and had such fun that I hardly stopped moving long enough to catch my breath.

Before I moved to France, my life had not prepared me for what I would discover there. I was raised in a comfortable, WASPy, upper-middle-class family in sunny and non-intellectual Pasadena, California. My father, John McWilliams, was a conservative businessman who managed family real estate holdings; my mother, Carolyn, whom we called Caro, was a very warm and social person. But like most of her peers, she didn't spend much time in the kitchen. She occasionally sallied forth to whip up baking-powder biscuits, or a cheese dish, or finnan haddie, but she was not a cook. Nor was I.

As a girl I had zero interest in the stove. I've always had a healthy appetite, especially for the wonderful meat and the fresh produce of California, but I was never encouraged to cook and just didn't see the point in it. Our family had a series of hired cooks, and they'd produce heaping portions of typical American fare—fat roasted chicken with buttery mashed potatoes and creamed spinach; or well-marbled porterhouse steaks; or aged leg of lamb cooked medium gray—not pinky-red rare, as the French do—and always accompanied by brown gravy and green mint sauce. It was delicious but not refined food.



Paul, on the other hand, had been raised in Boston by a rather bohemian mother who had lived in Paris and was an excellent cook. He was a cultured man, ten years older than I was, and by the time we met, during World War II, he had already traveled the world. Paul was a natty dresser and spoke French beautifully, and he adored good food and wine. He knew about dishes like *moules marinières* and *boeuf bourguignon* and *canard à l'orange*—things that seemed hopelessly exotic to my untrained ear and tongue. I was lucky to marry Paul. He was a great inspiration, his enthusiasm about wine and food helped to shape my tastes, and his encouragement saw me through discouraging moments. I would never have had my career without Paul Child.

We'd first met in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) during the Second World War and were married in September 1946. In preparation for living with a new husband on a limited government income, I decided I better learn how to cook. Before our wedding, I took a bride-to-be's cooking course from two Englishwomen in Los Angeles, who taught me to make things like pancakes. But the first meal I ever cooked for Paul was a bit more ambitious: brains simmered in red wine! I'm not quite sure why I picked that particular dish, other than that it sounded exotic and would be a fun way to impress my new husband. I skimmed over the recipe, and figured it wouldn't be too hard to make. But the results, alas, were messy to look at and not very good to eat. In fact, the dinner was a disaster. Paul laughed off, and we scrounged up something else that night. But deep down I was annoyed with myself, and I grew more determined than ever to learn how to cook well.



In our first year as young marrieds, we lived in Georgetown, in Washington, D.C., in a small white clapboard house on Olive Avenue. While Paul worked on mounting exhibits for the State Department, I worked as a file clerk. In the evening, I would approach the stove armed with lofty intentions, the *Joy of Cooking* or *Gourmet* magazine tucked under my arm, and little kitchen sense. My meals were satisfactory, but they took hours of laborious effort to produce. I'd usually plop something on the table by 10:00 p.m., have a few bites, and collapse into bed. Paul was unfailingly patient. But years later he'd admit to an interviewer: "Her first attempts were not altogether successful. . . . I was brave because I wanted to marry Julia. I trust I did not betray my point of view." (He did not.)

In the winter of 1948, Paul was offered a job running the Visual Presentation Department for the United States Information Service (USIS) in Paris, and I tagged along. I had never been to Europe, but once we had settled in Paris, it was clear that, out of sheer luck, I had landed in a magical city—that is still my favorite place on earth. Starting slowly, and then with a growing enthusiasm, I devoted myself to learning the language and the customs of my new home.

In Paris and later in Marseille, I was surrounded by some of the best food in the world, and I had an enthusiastic audience in my husband, so it seemed only logical that I should learn how to cook *cuisine bourgeoise*—good, traditional French home cooking. It was a revelation. I simply fell in love with that glorious food and those marvelous chefs. The longer we stayed there, the deeper my commitment became.

IN COLLABORATING on this book, Alex Prud'homme and I have been fortunate indeed to have spent hours together telling stories, reminiscing, and thinking out loud. Memory is selective, and we have not attempted to be encyclopedic here, but have focused on some of the large and small moments that

stuck with me for over fifty years.

Alex was born in 1961, the year that our first book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, which I wrote with Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle, was published. How appropriate, then, that he and I should work together on this volume, which recounts the making of that book.

Our research has been aided immeasurably by a thick trove of family letters and datebooks kept from those days, along with Paul's photographs, sketches, poems, and Valentine's Day cards. Paul and his twin brother, Charlie Child, a painter who lived in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, wrote to each other every week or so. Paul took letter writing seriously: he'd set aside time for it, tried to document our day-to-day lives in a journalistic way, and usually wrote three to six pages a week in a beautiful flowing hand with a special fountain pen; often he included little sketches of places we'd visited, photos (some of which we have used in these pages), or made mini-collages out of ticket stubs and newspaper newsprint. My letters were usually one or two pages, typed, and full of spelling mistakes, bad grammar, and exclamation points; I tended to focus on what I was cooking at the time, or the human dramas boiling around us. Written on thin pale-blue or white airmail paper, those hundreds of letters have survived the years in very good shape.

When I reread them now, the events those letters describe come rushing back to me with great immediacy: Paul noticing the brilliant sparkle of autumn light on the dark Seine, his daily battles with Washington bureaucrats, the smell of Montmartre at dusk, or the night we spied wild-haired Colette eating at that wonderful Old World restaurant Le Grand Véfour. In my letters, I enthuse over my first taste of a toothsome French duck roasted before an open fire, or the gossip I'd heard from the vegetable lady in the Rue de Bourgogne marketplace, or the latest mischief of our cat, Minette, or the failures and triumphs of our years of cookbook work. It is remarkable that our family had the foresight to save those letters—it's almost as if they knew Alex and I were going to sit down and write this book together one day.

We tip our hats in gratitude to the many people and institutions who have helped us with *My Life in France*, especially to my dear friend and lifelong editor at Knopf, Judith Jones, she of the gimlet eye and soft editorial touch. And to my beloved French "sisters," Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle with whom I collaborated; to my sister, Dorothy, my enthusiastic niece, Phila Cousins, and her brother, Sam; to my invaluable assistant, Stephanie Hersh, and my attorney Bill Truslow. We also sing the praises of the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute, which has graciously housed the bulk of my papers and Paul's photographs; the Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution, which has been kind enough to display artifacts from my career, including my entire kitchen from our house in Cambridge, Massachusetts; to WGBH, Boston's public television station; to my alma mater, Smith College; also to the many family members and friends who have aided us with their memories, photos, good company, and fine meals as we pieced together this volume.

What fun and good fortune I had living in France with Paul, and again in writing about our experiences with Alex. I hope that this book is as much fun for you to read as it was for us to put together—*bon appétit!*

Julia Child
Montecito, California

PART I

CHAPTER 1

La Belle France

I. SEA CHANGE

AT FIVE-FORTY-FIVE in the morning, Paul and I roused ourselves from our warm bunk and peered out the small porthole in our cabin aboard the *SS America*. Neither of us had slept very well that night, partially due to the weather and partially due to our rising excitement. We rubbed our eyes and squinted through the glass, and could see it was foggy out. But through the deep-blue dawn and swirling murk we spied rows of twinkling lights along the shore. It was Wednesday, November 11, 1948, and we had finally arrived at Le Havre, France.

I had never been to Europe before and didn't know what to expect. We had been at sea for a week, although it seemed a lot longer, and I was more than ready to step onto terra firma. As soon as our family had seen us off in fall-colored New York, the *America* had sailed straight into the teeth of a North Atlantic gale. As the big ship heeled and bucked in waves as tall as buildings, there was a constant sound of bashing, clashing, clicking, shuddering, swaying, and groaning. Lifelines were strung along the corridors. Up . . . up . . . up . . . the enormous liner would rise, and at the peak she would teeter for a moment, then down . . . down . . . down . . . she'd slide until her bow plunged into the trough with a great shuddering spray. Our muscles ached, our minds were weary, and smashed crockery was strewn about the floor. Most of the ship's passengers, and some of her crew, were green around the gills. Paul and I were lucky to be good sailors, with cast-iron stomachs: one morning we counted as two of the five passengers who made it to breakfast.

I had spent only a little time at sea, on my way to and from Asia during the Second World War, and had never experienced a storm like this before. Paul, on the other hand, had seen every kind of weather imaginable. In the early 1920s, unable to afford college, he had sailed from the United States to Panama on an oil tanker, hitched a ride on a little ferry from Marseille to Africa, crossed the Mediterranean and Atlantic from Trieste to New York, crewed aboard a schooner that sailed from Nova Scotia to South America, and served briefly aboard a command ship in the China Sea during World War II. He'd experienced waterspouts, lightning storms, and plenty of the "primordial violence of nature," as he put it. Paul was a sometimes macho, sometimes quiet, willful, bookish man. He suffered terrible vertigo, yet was the kind to push himself up to the top of a ship's rigging in a fierce gale. It was typical that aboard the tossing *SS America* he did most of the worrying for the two of us.

Paul had been offered the job of running the exhibits office for the United States Information

Service (USIS), at the American embassy in Paris. His assignment was to help promote French-American relations through the visual arts. It was a sort of cultural/propaganda job, and he was well-suited for it. Paul had lived and worked in France in the 1920s, spoke the language beautifully, and adored French food and wine. Paris was his favorite city in the world. So, when the U.S. government offered him a job there, he jumped at the chance. I just tagged along as his extra baggage.

Travel, we agreed, was a litmus test: if we could make the best of the chaos and serendipity that we'd inevitably meet in transit, then we'd surely be able to sail through the rest of life together just as fine. So far, we'd done pretty well.

We had met in Ceylon in the summer of 1944, when we'd both been posted there by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the CIA. Paul was an artist, and he'd been recruited to create war rooms where General Mountbatten could review the intelligence that our agents had sent from the field. I was head of the Registry, where, among other things, I processed agents' reports from the field and other top-secret papers. Late in the war, Paul and I were transferred to Kunming, China, where we worked for General Wedemeyer and continued our courtship over delicious Chinese food.

Although we had met abroad, we didn't count our wartime in Asia as real living-time abroad: we were working seven days a week, sleeping in group quarters, and constantly at the beck and call of the military.

But now the war was over. We had been married in 1946, lived for two years in Washington, D.C., and were moving to Paris. We'd been so busy since our wedding day, September 1, 1946, that we'd never taken a proper honeymoon. Perhaps a few years in Paris would make up for that sorry state of affairs and give us a sort of working honeymoon. Well, it *sounded* like a good plan.

AS I GAZED through the porthole at the twinkling lights of Le Havre, I realized I had no idea what I was looking at. France was a misty abstraction for me, a land I had long imagined but had no real sense of. And while I couldn't wait to step ashore, I had my reasons to be suspicious of it.

In Pasadena, California, where I was raised, France did not have a good reputation. My tall and taciturn father, "Big John" McWilliams, liked to say that all Europeans, especially the French, were "dark" and "dirty," although he'd never actually been to Europe and didn't know any Frenchmen. I had met some French people, but they were a couple of cranky spinster schoolteachers. Despite years of "learning" French, by rote, I could neither speak nor understand a word of the language. Furthermore, thanks to articles in *Vogue* and Hollywood spectacles, I suspected that France was a nation of icky-picky people where the women were all dainty, exquisitely coiffed, nasty little creatures, the men all Adolphe Menjou-like dandies who twirled their mustaches, pinched girls, and schemed against American rubes.

I was a six-foot-two-inch, thirty-six-year-old, rather loud and unserious Californian. The sight of France in my porthole was like a giant question mark.

The *America* entered Le Havre Harbor slowly. We could see giant cranes, piles of brick, bombed-out empty spaces, and rusting half-sunk hulks left over from the war. As tugs pushed us toward the

quay, I peered down from the rail at the crowd on the dock. My gaze stopped on a burly, gruff man with a weathered face and a battered, smoldering cigarette jutting from the corner of his mouth. His giant hands waved about in the air around his head as he shouted something to someone. He was a porter, and he was laughing and heaving luggage around like a happy bear, completely oblivious to me. His swollen belly and thick shoulders were encased in overalls of a distinctive deep blue, a very attractive color, and he had an earthy, amusing quality that began to ease my anxiety.

So THAT'S what a real Frenchman looks like, I said to myself. He's hardly Adolphe Menjou. Thank goodness, there are actual blood-and-guts people in this country!

By 7:00 a.m., Paul and I were ashore and our bags had passed through customs. For the next two hours, we sat there smoking and yawning, with our collars turned up against the drizzle. Finally, a crane pulled our large sky-blue Buick station wagon—which we'd nicknamed “the Blue Flash”—out of the ship's hold. The Buick swung overhead in a sling and then dropped down to the dock, where it landed with a bounce. It was immediately set upon by a gang of *mécaniciens*, men dressed in black berets, white butcher's aprons, and big rubber boots. They filled the Flash with *essence*, oil, and water, affixed our diplomatic license plates, and stowed our fourteen pieces of luggage and half a dozen trunks and blankets away all wrong. Paul tipped them, and restowed the bags so that he could see out the back window. He was very particular about his car-packing, and very good at it, too, like a master jigsaw-puzzler.

As he finished stowing, the rain eased and streaks of blue emerged from the gray scud overhead. We wedged ourselves into the front seat and pointed our wide, rumbling nose southeast, toward Paris.





Paul's photographs of the French countryside

II. *SOLE MEUNIÈRE*

THE NORMAN COUNTRYSIDE struck me as quintessentially French, in an indefinable way. The real sights and sounds and smells of this place were so much more particular and interesting than a movie montage or a magazine spread about "France" could ever be. Each little town had a distinct character, though some of them, like Yvetot, were still scarred by gaping bomb holes and knots of barbed wire. We saw hardly any other cars, but there were hundreds of bicyclists, old men driving horses-and-buggies, ladies dressed in black, and little boys in wooden shoes. The telephone poles were of a different size and shape from those in America. The fields were intensely cultivated. There were no billboards. And the occasional pink-and-white stucco villa set at the end of a formal *allée* of trees was both silly and charming. Quite unexpectedly, something about the earthy-smoky smells, the curve of the landscape, and the bright greenness of the cabbage fields reminded us both of China.

Oh, *la belle France*—without knowing it, I was already falling in love!

AT TWELVE-THIRTY we Flashed into Rouen. We passed the city's ancient and beautiful clock tower, and then its famous cathedral, still pockmarked from battle but magnificent with its stained-glass windows. We rolled to a stop in la Place du Vieux Marché, the square where Joan of Arc had met her fiery fate. There the *Guide Michelin* directed us to Restaurant La Couronne ("The Crown"), which had been built in 1345 in a medieval quarter-timbered house. Paul strode ahead, full of anticipation, but I hung back, concerned that I didn't look chic enough, that I wouldn't be able to communicate, and that the waiters would look down their long Gallic noses at us Yankee tourists.

It was warm inside, and the dining room was a comfortably old-fashioned brown-and-white space, neither humble nor luxurious. At the far end was an enormous fireplace with a rotary spit, on which something was cooking that sent out heavenly aromas. We were greeted by the *maître d'hôtel*, a slim, middle-aged man with dark hair who carried himself with an air of gentle seriousness. Paul spoke to him, and the *maître d'* smiled and said something back in a familiar way, as if they were old friends. Then he led us to a nice table not far from the fireplace. The other customers were all French, and

noticed that they were treated with exactly the same courtesy as we were. Nobody rolled their eyes at us or stuck their nose in the air. ~~Actually, the staff seemed happy to see us.~~

As we sat down, I heard two businessmen in gray suits at the next table asking questions of the waiter, an older, dignified man who gesticulated with a menu and answered them at length.

“What are they talking about?” I whispered to Paul.

“The waiter is telling them about the chicken they ordered,” he whispered back. “How it was raised, how it will be cooked, what side dishes they can have with it, and which wines would go with it best.”

“Wine?” I said. “At lunch?” I had never drunk much wine other than some \$1.19 California Burgundy, and certainly not in the middle of the day.

In France, Paul explained, good cooking was regarded as a combination of national sport and high art, and wine was always served with lunch and dinner. “The trick is moderation,” he said.

Suddenly the dining room filled with wonderfully intermixing aromas that I sort of recognized but couldn't name. The first smell was something oniony—“shallots,” Paul identified it, “being sautéed in fresh butter.” (“What's a shallot?” I asked, sheepishly. “You'll see,” he said.) Then came a warm and winy fragrance from the kitchen, which was probably a delicious sauce being reduced on the stove. This was followed by a whiff of something astringent: the salad being tossed in a big ceramic bowl with lemon, wine vinegar, olive oil, and a few shakes of salt and pepper.

My stomach gurgled with hunger.

I couldn't help noticing that the waiters carried themselves with a quiet joy, as if their entire mission in life was to make their customers feel comfortable and well tended. One of them glided up to my elbow. Glancing at the menu, Paul asked him questions in rapid-fire French. The waiter seemed to enjoy the back-and-forth with my husband. Oh, how I itched to be in on their conversation! Instead I smiled and nodded uncomprehendingly, although I tried to absorb all that was going on around me.

We began our lunch with a half-dozen oysters on the half-shell. I was used to bland oysters from Washington and Massachusetts, which I had never cared much for. But this platter of *portugaises* had a sensational briny flavor and a smooth texture that was entirely new and surprising. The oysters were served with rounds of *pain de seigle*, a pale rye bread, with a spread of unsalted butter. Paul explained that, as with wine, the French have “crus” of butter, special regions that produce individually flavored butters. *Beurre de Charentes* is a full-bodied butter, usually recommended for pastry dough or general cooking; *beurre d'Isigny* is a fine, light table butter. It was that delicious *Isigny* that we spread on our rounds of rye.

Rouen is famous for its duck dishes, but after consulting the waiter Paul had decided to order *sole meunière*. It arrived whole: a large, flat Dover sole that was perfectly browned in a sputtering butter sauce with a sprinkling of chopped parsley on top. The waiter carefully placed the platter in front of us, stepped back, and said: “*Bon appétit!*”

I closed my eyes and inhaled the rising perfume. Then I lifted a forkful of fish to my mouth, took

bite, and chewed slowly. The flesh of the sole was delicate, with a light but distinct taste of the ocean that blended marvelously with the browned butter. I chewed slowly and swallowed. It was a morsel of perfection.

In Pasadena, we used to have broiled mackerel for Friday dinners, codfish balls with egg sauce, “boiled” (poached) salmon on the Fourth of July, and the occasional pan-fried trout when camping in the Sierras. But at La Couronne I experienced fish, and a dining experience, of a higher order than anything I’d ever had before.

Along with our meal, we happily downed a whole bottle of Pouilly-Fumé, a wonderfully crisp white wine from the Loire Valley. Another revelation!

Then came *salade verte* laced with a lightly acidic vinaigrette. And I tasted my first real baguette—a crisp brown crust giving way to a slightly chewy, rather loosely textured pale-yellow interior, with a faint reminder of wheat and yeast in the odor and taste. Yum!

We followed our meal with a leisurely dessert of *fromage blanc*, and ended with a strong, dark coffee through a *filtre*. The waiter placed before us a cup topped with a metal canister, which contained coffee grounds and boiling water. With some urging by us impatient drinkers, the water eventually filtered down into the cup below. It was fun, and it provided a distinctive dark brew.

Paul paid the bill and chatted with the *maître d’*, telling him how much he looked forward to going back to Paris for the first time in eighteen years. The *maître d’* smiled as he scribbled something on the back of a card. “*Tiens*,” he said, handing it to me. The Dorin family, who owned La Couronne, also owned a restaurant in Paris, called La Truite, he explained, while Paul translated. On the card he had scribbled a note of introduction for us.

“*Mairci, monsoor*,” I said, with a flash of courage and an accent that sounded bad even to my own ear. The waiter nodded as if it were nothing, and moved off to greet some new customers.

Paul and I floated out the door into the brilliant sunshine and cool air. Our first lunch together in France had been absolute perfection. It was the most exciting meal of my life.

BACK IN THE FLASH, we continued to Paris along a highway built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. With double roadways on each side of a grass median, and well-engineered overpasses and underpasses, it reminded us of the Hutchinson River Parkway, outside of New York City. The impression faded as dusk came on and the unmistakable silhouette of the Eiffel Tower loomed in sight, outlined with blinking red lights.

Paris!

At nightfall, we entered the city via the Porte de Saint-Cloud. Navigating through the city was strange and hazardous. The streetlights had been dimmed, and for some reason (wartime habit?) Parisians drove with only their parking lights on. It was nearly impossible to see pedestrians or road signs, and the thick traffic moved slowly. Unlike in China or India, where people also drove with parking light, the Parisians would constantly flash on their real headlights for just a moment when

they thought there was something in the road.

Across the Pont Royal, up the Rue du Bac, nearly to Boulevard Saint-Germain, and then we pulled over at 7 Rue Montalembert in front of the Hôtel Pont Royal. We were exhausted, but thrilled.

Paul unloaded the Flash and drove off into the misty dark in search of a garage that was reputedly five minutes away. We'd been told that it wasn't safe to leave the car on the street at night. The Buick wagon was considerably bulkier than the local Citroëns and Peugeots, and Paul was anxious to find a safe berth for what the *garagistes* called our "*autobus américain*." I accompanied our bags up to our room, but noticed that the hotel seemed to be swaying from side to side, like the *America*: I had yet to regain my land legs.

An hour later, and still no sign of Paul. I was hungry and growing concerned. Finally, he reappeared in a lather, saying: "I had a hell of a time. I went *up* instead of *down* the Boulevard Raspail, then came back via Saint-Germain thinking it was Raspail, then got stuck on a one-way street. So I parked the car and walked. Eventually I found the garage, but then I couldn't find the car—I thought I'd left it on Raspail, but it was on Saint-Germain! Nobody knew where the garage was, or the hotel. Finally, I brought car to garage and me to you at the hotel. . . . Let's eat!"



Me looking out at Paris from the Hôtel Pont Royal

We went to a little place on Saint-Germain where the food was fine, although nothing comparable with La Couronne (the standard by which I would now measure every eatery), and disappointing because it was packed with tourists. I had only been in Paris for a few hours but already considered myself a native.

Paul's job at the USIS was to "inform the French people by graphic means about the aspects of

American life that the [United States] government deems important.” The idea was to build goodwill between our nations, to reinforce the idea that America was a strong and reliable ally, that the Marshall Plan was designed to help France get back on its feet (without telling Paris how to run its affairs), and to insinuate that rapacious Russia was not to be trusted. It seemed straightforward.

On his first day of work, Paul discovered that the USIS exhibits office had been leaderless for months and was a shambles. He was to oversee a staff of eight, all French—five photographers, two artists, and one secretary—who were demoralized, overworked, underpaid, riven with petty jealousies and hobbled by a lack of basic supplies. There was little or no photographic film, paper, developer, or flashbulbs. Even essentials like scissors, bottles of ink, stools—or a budget—were missing. The light in his office would conk out three or four times a day. Because there were no proper files, or shelves, most of his unit’s fifty thousand photographic prints and negatives were stuffed into ragged manila envelopes or old packing boxes on the floor.

In the meantime, the ECA, the Economic Cooperation Administration, which administered the Marshall Plan, was sending orders in big, thoughtless clumps: Prepare hundreds of exhibit materials for a trade fair in Lyon! Introduce yourself to all the local politicians and journalists! Send posters to Marseille, Bordeaux, and Strasbourg! Be charming at the ambassador’s champagne reception for three hundred VIPs! Put on an art show for an American ladies’ club! Et cetera. Paul had endured far worse during the war, but he fumed that such working conditions were “ridiculous, naïve, stupid, and incredible!”

I wandered the city, got lost, found myself again. I engaged the garage man in a lengthy, if not completely comprehensible, discussion about retarding the Flash’s spark to reduce the “ping.” I went into a big department store and bought a pair of slippers. I went into a boutique and bought a charming green-feathered hat. I got along “*assez bien*.”

At the American embassy I collected our ration books, pay information, commissary tickets, travel vouchers, leave sheets, *cartes d’identité*, and business cards. Mrs. Ambassador Caffrey had let it be known that she felt protocol had slipped around the embassy, and insisted that people like us—on the bottom of the diplomatic totem pole—leave our cards with everyone of equivalent or superior rank. That meant I had to leave over two hundred cards for Paul and over one hundred for me. Phooey!

ON NOVEMBER 5, a banner headline in the *International Herald Tribune* proclaimed that Harry Truman had been elected president, defeating Thomas Dewey at the eleventh hour. Paul and I, devoted Democrats, were exultant. My father, “Big John” McWilliams, a staunchly conservative Republican, was horrified.

Pop was a wonderful man on many counts, but our different world-views were a source of tension that made family visits uncomfortable for me and miserable for Paul. My mother, Caro, who had died from the effects of high blood pressure, and now my stepmother, Philadelphia McWilliams, known as Phila, were apolitical but went along with whatever Pop said for the sake of domestic harmony. My brother, John, the middle sibling, was a mild Republican; my younger sister, Dorothy, stood to the left of me. My father was pained by his daughters’ liberal leanings. He had assumed I would marry a Republican banker and settle in Pasadena to live a conventional life. But if I’d done that I’d probab-

have turned into an alcoholic, as a number of my friends had. Instead, I had married Paul Child, painter, photographer, poet, and mid-level diplomat who had taken me to live in dirty, dreaded France. I couldn't have been happier!

Reading about Truman's election victory, I imagined the doom and gloom around Pasadena: it must have seemed like the End of Life as Big John knew it. *Eh bien, tant pis*, as we Parisians liked to say.

PARIS SMELLED OF SMOKE, as though it were burning up. When you sneezed, you blew sludge onto your handkerchief. This was partly due to some of the murkiest fog on record. It was so thick, the newspapers reported, that airplanes were grounded and transatlantic steamers were stuck in port for days. Everyone you met had a "fog drama" to tell. Some people were so terrified of getting lost that they spent all night in their cars, others missed plunging into the Seine by a centimeter, and several people drove for hours in the wrong direction, only to find themselves at a metro stop on the outskirts of town; they abandoned their cars and took the train home, but, upon emerging from the metro, got lost on foot. The fog insinuated itself everywhere, even inside the house. It was disconcerting to see clouds in your rooms, and it gave you a vague sense of being suffocated.

But on our first Saturday in Paris, we awoke to a brilliant bright-blue sky. It was thrilling, as if the curtain had been pulled back to reveal a mound of jewels. Paul couldn't wait to show me around his city.

We began at the Deux Magots café, where we ordered *café complet*. Paul was amused to see that nothing had changed since his last visit, back in 1928. The seats inside were still covered with orange plush, the brass light fixtures were still unpolished, and the waiters—and probably the dust balls in the corners—were the same. We sat outside, on wicker seats, munching our croissants and watching the morning sun illuminate the chimney pots. Suddenly the café was invaded by a mob of camera operators, soundmen, prop boys, and actors, including Burgess (Buzz) Meredith and Franchot Tone, costumed and grease-painted as shabby "Left Bank artists." Paul, who had once worked as a busboy/scenery-painter in Hollywood, chatted with Meredith about his movie, and how people in the film business were always the same agreeable type, whether in Paris, London, or Los Angeles.

We wandered up the street. Paul—mid-sized, bald, with a mustache and glasses, dressed in a trench coat and beret and thick-soled shoes—strode ahead, eyes alert and noticing everything, his trusty Graflex camera strapped around his shoulder. I followed, eyes wide open, mouth mostly shut, head skipping with excitement.

At Place Saint-Sulpice, black-outfitted wedding guests were kissing each other on both cheeks by the fountain, and the building where Paul's mother had lived twenty years earlier was unchanged. Glancing up at a balcony, he spied a flower box she had made, now filled with marigolds. But at the corner, a favorite old building had disappeared. Not far away, the house where Paul's twin, Charlie, and his wife, Fredericka, known as Freddie, had once lived was now just a rubble-strewn lot (had it been blown to bits by a bomb?). Next to the theater on Place de l'Odéon we noticed a small marble plaque that read: "In memory of Jean Bares, killed at this spot in defense of his country, June 1, 1944." There were many of these somber reminders around the city.

We wended our way across the Seine and through the green Tuileries and along dank backstreets that smelled of rotting food, burned wood, sewage, old plaster, and human sweat. Then up to Montmartre and Sacré-Coeur, and The View over the whole city. Then down again, back over the Seine and, via Rue Bonaparte, to lunch at a wonderful old restaurant called Michaud.

Parisian restaurants were very different from American eateries. It was such fun to go into a little bistro and find cats on the chairs, poodles under the tables or poking out of women's bags, and chirping birds in the corner. I loved the crustacean stands in front of cafés, and began to order boldly. *Moules marinières* was a new dish to me; the mussels' beards had been removed, and the flesh tasted lovely in a way I had never expected it to. There were other surprises, too, such as the great big juicy pears grown right there in Paris, so succulent you could eat them with a spoon. And the grapes! In America, grapes bored me, but the Parisian grapes were exquisite, with a delicate, fugitive, sweet, ambrosial, and irresistible flavor.

As we explored the city, we made a point of trying every kind of cuisine, from fancy to hole-in-the-wall. In general, the more expensive the establishment, the less glad they were to see us, perhaps because they could sense us counting our centimes. The red-covered *Guide Michelin* became our Bible, and we decided that we preferred the restaurants rated with two crossed forks, which stood for medium quality and expense. A meal for two at such an establishment would run us about five dollars, which included a bottle of *vin ordinaire*.

Michaud became our favorite place for a time. Paul had learned about it through friends at the embassy, and it was just around the corner from Rue du Bac, where Rue de l'Université turns into Rue de Jacob. It was a relaxed, intimate two-forker. The proprietress, known simply as Madame, stood about four feet three inches tall, had a neat little French figure, red hair, and a thrifty Gallic "save everything" quality. A waiter would take your order and bring it to Madame's headquarters at the bar. In one motion, she'd glance at the ticket, dive into a little icebox, and emerge with the carefully apportioned makings of your meal—meat, fish, or eggs—put it on a plate, and send it into the kitchen to be cooked. She poured the wine in the carafes. She made change at the register. If sugar ran low, she'd trot upstairs to her apartment to fetch it in a brown cardboard box; then she'd measure just the right amount into a jar, with not a single grain wasted.

Despite her frugality, Madame had an intimate and subtle charm. In a typical evening, you'd always shake her hand three times: upon entering, when she dropped by your table in the midst of your meal, and at the door as you left. She was happy to sit down with a cup of coffee to talk, but only for a moment. She'd join in a celebration with a glass of champagne, but for just long enough. The waiters at Michaud were all around sixty years old and carried themselves with the same intimate yet reserved manner she did. The clientele seemed to be made up of Parisians from the *quartier* and a smattering of foreigners who'd stumbled over this little prize and had kept it to themselves.

That afternoon, Paul ordered *rognons sautés au beurre* (braised kidneys) with watercress and fried potatoes. I was tempted by many things, but finally succumbed once again to *sole meunière*. I just couldn't get over how good it was, the sole crisp and bristling from the fire. With a carafe of *vin blanc*, *compris* and a perfectly soft slice of Brie, the entire lunch came to 970 francs, or about \$3.15.

Computing *l'addition* all depended on which exchange rate you used. We U.S. Embassy types were

only allowed to exchange dollars for francs at the official rate, about 313 francs to the dollar. But on the black market the exchange was 450 francs to the dollar, an improvement of more than 33 percent. Though we could have used the extra money, it was illegal, and we didn't dare risk our pride, or our posting, to save a few sous.

After more wandering, we had a very ordinary dinner, but finished the evening on a high note with dessert at Brasserie Lipp. I was feeling buoyant, and so was Paul. We discussed the stereotype of the Rude Frenchman: Paul declared that, in Paris of the 1920s, 80 percent of the people were difficult and 20 percent were charming; now the reverse was true, he said—80 percent of Parisians were charming and only 20 percent were rude. This, he figured, was probably an aftereffect of the war. But it might also have been due to *his* new outlook on life. “I am less sour now than I used to be,” he admitted. “It’s because of you, Julie.” We analyzed one another, and concluded that marriage and advancing age agreed with us. Most of all, Paris was making us giddy.



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