CITY OF ANTICIPATION

Alexandra Pianoff

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I am standing in the dining room of my Russian grandmother’s aging Paris flat when she hands me the telegram from Australia. Baba calls me ‘Sonia’ which is my middle name and also her name. “Sonia [Saw-nya], it’s bad news, your Australian grandfather has died.”

Just as I stand on the edge of new life, poised for flight, the firm ground I stand on - for that is what the past is - falls away.

* * *
Baba's flat, interior
I walked everywhere. I floated. I had arrived in the city where simply to order coffee in a café (and they were everywhere) was a glamorous event, or to emerge from the metro at some dazzling intersection.

Still, after a month of bliss and even though I was staying with my Russian grandmother, ‘Baba’, there were many tough days too as I came to know Paris. The combination of toughness and elegance, fascination and aloofness would remain.

One morning out of loneliness I decided to visit the Alliance Française in boulevard Raspail. The walk from Baba’s flat towards the Quartier Latin was becoming very familiar. There was an open-air market in boulevard Raspail. Lettuces, artichokes, fresh eggs, chickens hanging upside down. I passed mountains of mussels and shrimps and smelt the sea. The Alliance Française was a large, neglected building full of refugees like myself. On the back stairs I ran into two Moroccan boys singing. “Do you have a cigarette?” one asked me. “I don’t smoke”, I replied in my professionally breezy French. “It’s better that way,” said the other.

Since the best of the Alliance Française was to be found on the back stairs, I returned to rue Lecourbe to have lunch with Baba. Baba was always interesting. She talked to me about Nicholas Berdyaev, a Russian historian who had spent the second half of his life in Paris. He had been a friend of Dadia’s, my Russian grandfather. After Berdyaev’s death, Dadia had helped to transform his house outside Paris into a museum. “Berdyaev always had women around him, and books. He had a cat called ‘Mourka’. When you get a cat, Sonia, you must call her Mourka.” I knew Berdyaev’s face from the
The Russian connection in my Paris life was to be very colourful. The very next afternoon, the doorbell rang. It was André Kobylansky. His daughters were about my age and Baba had written to him suggesting I meet them. André seemed happy to do most of the talking and often he and Baba switched to Russian. He invited me to dine with him and his family the next day which would be Easter Sunday. I was delighted by this unexpected hospitality. I thought that he looked humorous, and interesting and, again, not at all like those Russian male ballet dancers I had dreamt about through high school in Sydney (when one of the plans had been to become a ‘ballerina’). André Kobylansky and Nicholas Berdyaev must be exceptions, I thought. The real Russians were probably still back in Russia.

After André left, I went out to buy some chocolate Easter eggs for the family. Then I set off with Baba to a little Russian Orthodox church for the Palm Sunday service (it was not yet Easter according to the Orthodox calendar.) It was an ominously hot afternoon and during the service I stood with a French copy of the liturgy in one hand, some greenery and a melting candle in the other, feeling hot and bored throughout the very lengthy celebration which was conducted in Old Slavonic. I found the whole thing oppressive and alien and I could not bring myself to join in the communion (kissing the icon, having holy oil applied by the priest, and taking a piece of bread from one of the altar boys). After it was all over, I walked home while Baba took the bus. The sun glowed red through the smog. Paris seemed sinisterly warm this spring.

“You can’t sell religion,” Baba observed in her usual unsettling, cryptic manner that evening as she said goodnight.

But I did have a happier experience of ‘religion’ when I went with her to the small Russian church in rue Pétel, not far from rue
Lecourbe. Inside was like Aladdin’s cave with lamps and candles and icons. We placed a candle under our namesake, Saint Sophia. “You will see,” said Baba, “how wisdom will guide you in your life.” Yes, I would make no mistakes. Saint Sophia had three daughters, ‘Faith,’ ‘Hope’ and ‘Love’. It all sounded very attractive. Baba introduced me to a few more ‘saints’, among them Panteleimon the Healer. “I like this saint,” I said, “because he heals everything.” Little did Baba know how I already - young and untested as I looked - longed for a Panteleimon.

Easter Sunday of this year was to be a very happy and memorable day for me because I met the Kobylansky family, a family which became mine for the time I was in Paris. ‘Kob-y-ly-ansky’, with the emphasis heavily on the ‘ansky’, was Baba’s Russian pronunciation of the name. (The French couldn’t be bothered with that and had their own matter-of-fact way of bending ‘foreign’ names into submission). The fifteenth arrondissement where Baba and the Kobylanskys lived was a Russian quarter - not for aristocrats or ‘white’ Russians but for more ‘ordinary’ Russians. So I had only a short distance to walk to arrive chez Kobylansky and since there was no lift, I had to walk up five flights of stairs. I was shown into the delightful dining room which had French doors opening onto a tiny balcony and a view onto the black wrought iron balconies across the street where someone had hung out a pair of bright red socks to dry. Their tiny apartment had three balconies and I spontaneously christened it ‘Les Trois Balcons’.

Marcelle Kobylansky, André’s wife, was Swiss, and she had a warmth and friendliness which somehow made everything glow. The two daughters were also delightful and beautiful to look at. I felt sure that Degas must have painted Catherine (pronounced ‘Katrine’), and Renoir Anne (pronounced ‘Un’ to rhyme with ‘fun’). ‘Deux petits bijoux parisiens’ (‘Two little Parisian jewels’) as a friend of Madame Kobylansky’s had described them. The family was not tall. With a
Anne and André Kobylansky

Catherine and Marcelle Kobylansky
Russian accent André practised some self-taught English on me: “My daughters are microscopic,” he said. ‘Me-krross-koppik!’ (the accent on the ‘krross’). I laughed. The word was almost unrecognizable.

I felt an immediate bond with Catherine and Anne. Though we were only half Russian, a Slav sense of humour seemed common to us all: fanciful, crazy and fluid. André told us a gruesome joke about a man who slept in an attic room with his bed placed under the sloping ceiling in such a way that every time he tried to get up he hit his head hard on the ceiling, knocking himself unconscious so that he was never able to get out of bed. It hurt to laugh at this one. I felt almost scared that perhaps André saw himself trapped in this scenario.

We sat down to lunch in the dining room with its round table, antique chairs, Louis XV cabinet, seventeenth century Swiss cupboard, Medieval (!) casserole dish, and a little engraving of Marcelle's birthplace near Geneva. It was such an attractive setting - pretty blue and white plates already set on the table, white linen - all, surely, a reflection of Madame Kobylansky. I may have given here an impression of wealth. In fact, the family only just managed to pay their bills.

André brought the wine in a carafe - a friend had given him a little barrel of Bordeaux rosé which they kept in the kitchen. We began eating: steak and ‘frites’, salad, then cheese, followed by ice-cream. Finally coffee and the little chocolate Easter eggs which I had bought. We all talked so much that I hardly had the chance to acknowledge the beautifully presented meal. The family complimented me on my French and Madame K told me not to become ‘contaminated’ by the French of the French.

“Mais je suis venue exprès pour me faire contaminer!” (But I have come to Paris especially to get contaminated!) I was quick to reply. I could not have chosen my words better to sum up the years to come.

After lunch I spoke some more with Marcelle, Catherine and
Anne. Marcelle was often quite ill with migraine headaches which prevented her from working as often as she wanted. She had a Swiss diploma in mothercraft nursing and was skilful in helping doctors to diagnose sick babies. She was observant and intuitive to a remarkable degree. Catherine was half-heartedly enrolled in ‘Arts’ at the Sorbonne but her real talent was her painting. And Anne wanted to be an actress. She practised her English on me with her deep, grave voice and I laughed at her French-American accent. She told me about her dream of going to America and becoming the new Charlotte Rampling (Shah-r-lot-te Rom-pling). To my eyes she was infinitely more fascinating than this ‘Charlotte’. She was Chekhov’s Nina in The Seagull, a role she longed to play. For some reason, the image of the dying seagull seemed too tragic in his happy setting. These gifted daughters ranked with Paris’ other treasures, its Impressionist paintings, the stained glass windows of Notre Dame cathedral. If I had wanted to meet the best of Paris, I could not have been luckier.

André had disappeared to his ‘study’, possibly to get depressed over his unpublished manuscript on the Russian writer Gogol. I thought it was a shame to get depressed over a book. A book, in my opinion, came very second to life. Life and living came first and this was my grand Parisian plan: to live life to the full.

Baba must have felt I was not doing too good a job of this because she commented to me one day, “La vie, elle est faite pour être vécue. Il faut la vivre, la vie!” (Life is made for living. You have to live life.) Possibly I just had no idea how to live life.

The next day was a glorious spring day. Swept up in the spring and intoxicated by it, I went on a wonderful walk towards the river Seine as far as the ornate Pont Alexandre III, which I admired as though it had been especially built for me. When I returned to rue Lecourbe and had lunch with Baba, she filled me in on the bleaker side of the Kobylansky story. How melancholy Andre had contracted tuberculosis when he was growing up and had been sent to a
sanatorium in Switzerland. “That’s how he met Marcelle. They’re a badly matched couple,” was Baba’s description. I was sorry to hear this. My Paris chocolate box might even have some poisonous choices in it. As we sat in the narrow kitchen at the little plastic covered table eating our soup and rye bread and later drinking tea with lemon, I wondered about the flow of life, and why people ended up where they did, and what it might mean that Baba's forty years in Paris and my six months were now flowing together. I went into my room and spent the afternoon letter-writing, my way of dispersing life's shadows.

My next attempt to open Parisian doors was a typing school, the ‘école Remington’. If I learnt to type in French, who knows, I might rise to great heights. After making enquiries over the phone (from the post office because Baba did not have a phone), I turned up for a trial session. But I was quick - a bit too quick - to decide that the secretarial and commercial world just wasn’t me, and escaped from the typing class back into Paris: into the smell of cafés and tabacs and the warmth of spring in the air and the fascinating elegance of ‘la vie de trottoir’ (pavement life) as I called it - it sounded so good in French! Now this was life. There were tourists everywhere (not me, of course), but Paris seemed to accommodate well to tourists.

After a quick lunch with Baba, I set out again, this time to ‘école Berlitz’ at place de l’Opéra to try and open another door. Here I made enquiries about Spanish classes and was able to enrol in a course that would start up soon. Spanish was my choice because of a trip through Spain three months earlier and Spain continued to fascinate me.

I decided too that it was time I enquired about my French government award. Once again I set off for boulevard Raspail, enjoying a nice, straight, windy walk. At the Office National des Universités, a pleasant old building with a tulip patch in front, I was directed to office number 6 for Australian ‘assistantships’. No, they
could not tell me which high school I had been appointed to as an English language assistant (they were paid to withhold information, not to give it), but they could tell me that I would be in Paris.

That night there was a furious wind and I had a strange dream about horses knocked over by the wind and unable to get up again. Some of them were hanging on the branches of trees, helpless victims of the pounding gale. It was like walking through a battlefield in the aftermath of a war.

* * *

25th April, 1976

The Russian Easter

Xpucmoc Bocpece! Christ is Risen! 
BoucmuHy Bockpece! Indeed He is Risen!
Baba said as she kissed me good morning and put on her coat, tied her scarf under her chin, and set off for the church. I went shopping at the open-air market in preparation for our Easter Sunday lunch. Then I made some vegetable soup and got the kitchen table ready with Baba's pascha (a Russian Easter dessert), and two carnations, one red and one white, that Baba had brought from the church the day before. When Baba returned from the Easter service we sat down to lunch. Baba had brought me a brilliant crimson-coloured egg from the church. She described to me her memory of Easter in the Ukraine before the 1917 revolution. Of the ice carvings made to look like churches with their onion domes, coloured with vegetable colouring: green and beetroot red. How beautiful it was to look at! And how, like a kind of baptism, some tough men would cut a hole in the ice of the river, and plunge into the warmer water beneath. Baba, like me, loved snow and ice. “Alaska, that’s where I should be living.” Baba never really felt at home in Paris.
Monday, 26th April

Ecole Pigier

I had decided sensibly that it would be a good idea after all to learn to type in French. I enrolled at a prominently advertised school, PIGIER. My first morning I set off to the first session with Baba’s blessing. She always gave her blessing with a solemn sign of the cross for any new venture whether she approved it or not. Pigier was a plush sort of place, and its audio-visual approach was almost enjoyable. This remote control method of teaching was how I learnt, over an intensive period of six weeks and at great expense, to type, achieving the correct result with the wrong technique.

Back at rue Lecourbe there were visitors because of the Russian Easter. Olga. Her magnificent voice - a distinctive Russian voice - resounded out of her. She had a round face, large eyes, and straight, dark hair. She was how I imagined Tatiana to be in Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin. “She has a retarded daughter,” Baba told me, determined to keep a tight rein on me and to remind me of distasteful ‘reality’. I always felt that Baba misunderstood me on this score. I was hardly a picture of carefree youth. Then Solange, Theodore’s good friend in the last years of his life. Theodore, Baba’s youngest child, and her favourite, had died prematurely of leukaemia. Solange joined us for pascha and red wine.

In the evening I sat in what Baba called ‘the philosopher’s chair’ next to her bed and listened, as I often did, to her wonderful flow of words.

The rue Lecourbe flat was very run down. The walls were yellow with age, the furniture well-worn, even decrepit. The philosopher’s chair was leather with bits of stuffing leaking out. It was uncomfortable. Baba would sit in state on her narrow bed and pour out family history or her thoughts on life and its suffering. Mostly I
did not know how to respond. I was a diplomatic listener. I heard a lot about my uncle Theodore and my cousin Natasha. There was a black and white photo of Natasha and Theodore in the dining room on the mantlepiece, taken when Natasha was sixteen. It had been taken in the Champs Elysées by a photographer who had been understandably struck by these two unforgettable faces. Theodore, thin, pale and Proustian. Natasha’s great beauty - the vital Natasha of Tolstoy’s War and Peace.

Theodore had died in his early fifties in a hospital On the Ile de la Cité, the hospital of the Hotel Dieu, just as the bells of Notre Dame were ringing, said Baba. “Theodore lost his way in this world,” Baba said of her beloved son. “When he died I almost went mad with grief. I still cry and cry and cry but Father Serge says ‘This is good. It’s good to cry.’” But Baba had not gone mad. Instead, she had survived to live in a way that will be my model for how to live a dignified old age. Every day she would go to the church to pray, taking with her a list of ‘dead’ souls to pray for. “It is important, Sonia, to pray for the dead.” She prayed for my Australian grandfather. Then she added, “You know, Sonia, there is - and there isn’t - another life.”

She would shop in the market buying the cheapest of everything: half-rotten tomatoes, tired cabbages, old, leathery camemberts. Out of the rejected vegetables she cooked really delicious soups. She would return home each day with a copy of ‘Le Monde’ which she read in bed. She listened twice a day to the news (les informations), holding the little transistor close to her ear, and she shared more thoughts with me: how she liked the American president Jimmy Carter (she pronounced his name with an American accent), how the Arabs had plenty of oil but not enough water. “They're all thirsty.” How she thought that Australia was like Russia.

In the afternoon she would go for a walk in the ‘quartier’ and then sit in the local plot of greenery to read her mail. She wrote a lot
of letters herself. It was a medium that suited her: writing.

I had somehow managed on my Eurail trip to make friends with a family in Lyon, who had introduced me to Gaby, a keen photographer. Gaby was visiting his brother in Paris, so he contacted me and asked if I would like to join them for the show ‘Holiday on Ice’. I was such a snob. Had I come all the way to Paris to see ‘Holiday on Ice?’ It appears I had. Baba picked up a bourgeois vibe and since she disliked the French she warned me not to get too involved. I was into opening doors, not closing them at the time, so I joined Gaby and his brother Michel and his brother’s wife, Dominique, for a spectacle of outstanding ice-skating. One magnificent negro skater did a solo to ‘Old Man River’. The words of the song haunted me. “Old Man River must know something but he just rolls on.”

The only Parisian element of the show was a number called ‘Les caniches de Paris’, a disturbing sight of little dogs in tutus being put through their hoops. Was this what Baba meant by ‘bourgeois’? After the show we returned to Dominique and Michel’s apartment for a kind of supper. Here I struck a language difficulty. Australians were not the only ones to mumble. The French could mumble too. Also, there seemed to be a colloquial French which Catherine and Anne Kobylansky had failed to let me in on. I could see that the idea was to mumble a joke, laugh, and then mumble a better one, but I did not feel motivated to understand the jokes. I feared I may not have laughed anyway. My Lyon friends were unaware of the seething intolerance I was concealing and invited me to join them again the next day which was a Sunday for a walk around Ile de la Cité.

Though I was lonely, my greatest pleasure was to explore Paris by myself. I worked at familiarizing myself with the left bank quartiers which fronted onto the Seine. I also worked hard at blending into the scenery with European self-assurance. And I succeeded. The French did not ask me where I came from. Instead they asked hesitantly, “You're not French, are you?” I was like a New Zealander
in Sydney, ambiguously local. But this approach had its drawbacks. For me the Eiffel Tower was like the Sydney harbour bridge, something you acknowledged as you passed but never actually visited. So I never saw the view of Paris from the Eiffel Tower. I only went to Montmartre once because tourism seemed to my eyes to have spoilt it. My idea was to let Paris unfold naturally and untouristically.

One afternoon I went with Baba to visit her friend, Natasha, a woman of ninety-two. Baba was only approaching eighty so she described Natasha as ‘the old lady’. Natasha was a delight. I thoroughly enjoyed listening to her and Baba speaking in Russian and glowed when she put her arms around me and called me ‘Sonetchka’. She was so animated. She had loved and had read most of the novels of the great French writer Balzac. She had a piano and played and sang for us a Russian song. Her stuffy little ‘studio’ was interesting: the icon altar in the corner, photos on the walls, Russian magazines and books everywhere, Caucasian style embroidered chair and cushion covers, the opened piano strewn with music books. She seemed to have successfully blocked out the 1970’s and boredom. Probably she had never heard of boredom. I had. And so had Paris’ unemployed youth who had scrawled on empty walls:

“I don't want to die of boredom. Protest against the high standard of living. Long live organised plunder! The walls belong to us!”

In the evening, feeling myself at a loose end, I dropped in on the Kobylanskys. To my embarrassment, I had entered on a family dinner party. Two of Marcelle’s cousins were there from Geneva. They were sisters. The louder, larger one worked for the Banque Populaire de Suisse which she said was very ‘populaire’. She also spoke fluent German and some English. She was a clever person. “A cordon bleu cook” said Marcelle. Aside, Catherine told me that she had had to get married quite young. The doctor had recommended it. Both cousins were very well dressed and their French was superb
educated French. But they seemed to lack a sense of humour. The Kobylanskys were relieved I had turned up.

Tuesday, May 4th

After plodding through four hour’s typing at Pigier, I turned up at the Berlitz language school (metro Opéra) for my first Spanish class, only to discover the teachers had all gone out on strike. The ‘Escorial’ group would have to be patient. Strikes, I was to discover, were quite popular in Paris - for philosophical reasons.

On my way home on the metro, images of a recent trip through France and Spain with some other Australian students mingled with half-lit dreams of a future life in Paris. I remembered how Baba had got me up before dawn and I had seen Paris wake up in the dark from the windows of her rue Lecourbe apartment, and how still in the dark I had taken the metro to the Gare d’Austerlitz, meeting up excitedly with my friends. We had shared four years of French at Sydney University but how different we seemed to each other now in this European setting. I realized I hardly knew Janet, or John, or myself.

France had failed to stir me in the way that Spain would. The images of Spain which flashed across my mind now were so dramatic. My first view of this country had been by moonlight, a beautiful full moon. During the eight and a half hour haul to Madrid on a train full of resilient, lively Spaniards, we had our chance to discover some of the magnificent Spanish countryside. First the Pyrénées, snow-peaked and imposing. Then vast, empty plains: stark, with red earth and sparse olive-grey trees. I responded to this country as though I recognised it. Spain seemed to have a hidden fire. And yet, didn’t it remind me of Australia?

With us on the train were a group of nuns who sang some beautiful Spanish folksongs and hymns as we wound through the
Pyrenees. Their songs, like the mountains, lifted us up, making us feel exhilarated and disembodied.

There was a lot of life being lived on the train from compartment to compartment. A Spanish boy borrowed our Berlitz phrase book for the section on ‘Making Friends’. Later in the morning we stood in the corridor and hung out the window into the fresh air and sunlight. Stone walls built without cement. Donkeys. Unsteady-looking stone houses with undulating terra cotta roofs, and closer to Madrid volcanic rock shaped to look like a pre-historic city. With Picasso simplicity and confidence the landscape communicated to us something vivid, vital, extreme and strong.

We had gone further south. The orange trees of Seville seemed now to stand out dramatically against the grey of Paris. Spain had left its mark on me like the bold brush strokes of an inspired painter. Momentarily this vivid picture of Spain overpowered my Paris life.

Thursday, May 6th

In the unusually warm temperature I saw Baba off at the Gare de Lyon. I would be alone for a month while she visited Natasha who was living in the south of France. I felt strange, exhilarated, and apprehensive.

I attended my typing class and then walked all the way to Opéra for another attempt at starting Spanish classes. Though the English teachers were still out on strike, Spanish was on. We were four women with an elderly Spaniard who struck me as a kind of psychological tyrant. No young men. However, my desire to learn Spanish transcended this initial disappointment.

Sunday, May 9th

Catherine K. had a student friend, Solange, who lived with her Moroccan boyfriend in Saint Germain. Today we were going into
the Normandy countryside for a ‘méchoui’ (Moroccan style lamb on the spit) at Solange’s parent’s home. Catherine and I were up early. It was lovely to see Paris fresh and empty on a Sunday morning. To see the early morning sunlight over the Seine, the cafes just opening up and out onto the street, and the tramps breakfasting on bread and wine by the fountain of Saint Michel. We went up the five flights of stairs and entered Mohamet's delightful ‘studio’ (as the smaller flats were called) with its beautiful prints on the walls, and romantic view of the tumbledown slate roofs and attic windows and chimneys of Saint Germain. One could even see the steeple of Saint Severin and the towers of Notre Dame. What a backdrop!

In relaxed Moroccan style, Mohamet (Mow-a-met) had us waiting almost two hours with our bags of ‘couscous extra’ (our contribution to the lunch) before we were able to begin our drive to Normandy. Friends turned up, mostly students. The first arrival was ‘Pierrot le fou’ who was extremely thin. He had a very white face, frizzy hair, an unhealthy look, and a soft, almost non-existent handshake. With him was Colette, his feminine equivalent. They had a very fragile-sounding Renault 12. Next were lively Anne-Marie, sedate Monique, and redhead Christianne. The chic French names took on human forms. It was Mohamet’s mate Latif (also known as Relatif or Superlatif) who drove Catherine and me. In the course of the trip he held court most impressively and forcefully. A man, truly, of many talents. He was studying for a doctorate in Political Science. ‘Sciences Po’ as it was called. If you were studying Sciences Po then you were in touch with the heart of the matter. Latif noted that he had the extreme good fortune to be a member of Raymond Aron’s team. Now Raymond Aron was another name that got passed around. It sounded beautiful French with its two ‘r’s’ and silent ‘d’ and to a foreigner it sounded like an indecipherable curse - ‘Ray-mon-a (as in ‘apple’) -rong’. But I was already not a foreigner. I could spell R-a-y-m-o-n-d A-r-o-n.
At one stage on the ‘périphérique’ (the expressway around Paris) we were pulled over by the charming ‘flics’ (a great word for cops) who checked out Latif’s impeccable ID and then let us go.

We arrived in the little Norman village where Solange’s parents had retired and found the large garden with its cherry trees where Mohamet, stripped to the waist (it suited him), was already at work on the ‘méchoui’. More friends arrived. I met Alain, who relaxed into his deck chair and through very thick spectacles pontificated on student left wing groups. Then Françoise, who looked sick and sulky, and her boyfriend, Philippe, who had large blue innocent eyes and enchanting curls of angel hair. To my eyes, these young French students looked mostly sick and depressed. Was this the fate that awaited me?

When the lamb on the spit was almost cooked, Latif, in his extrovert way, made the couscous as only he knew how to, and then we all sat around a long trestle table under the cherry trees eating roast lamb, couscous, French bread, and drinking red wine. In my innocent Australian way I was ‘friendly’. I spoke with Colette who was studying psychiatry. She told me that my French was snobbish. That shut me up. Four years university French might well close as many doors as it opened. After a few trials and errors I joined friendly Mohamet and Catherine and watched the abrupt young French students from a safe distance.

Before leaving, Catherine and I took a walk into a nearby wood where the ground was thickly covered with a mass of bluebells. A blue haze seemed to rise up from the flowers. It was real Sleeping Beauty country.

The trip back with irrepressible Latif was slowed down by the traditional Sunday evening traffic chaos leading into Paris. Latif liked Catherine’s oriental look. She always looked as though she had strayed out of a harem. He made some arrangement to see her again and as Catherine explained to me, she needed a man to talk to. And
Latif needed a woman to listen to him. Latif finally dropped us off at metro Etoile at midnight amid the floodlights of the Arc de Triomphe and the headlights of cars. We were back in star-studded Paris.

I persisted with the typing course, achieving the correct result in the wrong way, hours on end. The highlight of my weeks was the Spanish class. Other languages were still out on strike. Spanish seemed to have been the first to recover. So there was plenty of strike ‘activity’ and posters around the school. Our older teacher possibly disapproved of strikes. We lost him to a new, younger man who spoke with Castilian pride and charm and gave our group some Spanish verve.

Baba had instructed me to go and visit ‘old’ Tatiana, warning me that ‘Prayer without action is nothing’. I found this form of religion rather forbidding. Besides, I was not interested in prayer; all I wanted was action and there wasn’t enough of it. Tatiana was very lively and youthful - a lot more so than me. She sat down at her out of tune piano and played for me extracts from ‘La Traviata’ telling me the words in Italian. There I was in a stuffy, overcrowded and dark little room looking out onto the bright green of the chestnut trees of rue de la Convention and thinking, ‘Tatiana is like a breath of fresh air. Such a free spirit.’ She reminded me of Baba in this. As Tatiana kissed me good-bye she said, “Happiness shared is doubled, sorrow shared is halved.” (La joie partagée devient doublée, la douleur partagée devient la moitié.)

I returned to rue Lecourbe and sat down in the dining room under the picture of Beethoven and began to write a letter to Baba about my visit. I had the shutters and the windows wide open because it was so hot. I might be lonely, but I was lonely in Paris. That was the difference. While I was writing, a little yellow canary flew in and astonished me by being so friendly. It did not seem to panic to get out, it wanted to stay and talk. Like a friend ‘he’ lingered for a long time on the window sill before flying away again. When Baba
returned a few weeks later from staying with Natasha, I told her about the canary and she said, “That was the soul of your Australian grandfather come to say ‘hello’.” How could Baba say such things? And yet, this bright, gregarious little bird was not unlike my grandfather. Apart from hello, had he wanted to say something else? Something about the force and energy of his sun-drenched country?

My loneliness was increased by my not feeling terribly well. A doctor would probably, like me, have assumed my problems were psychological and, unwisely, have looked no further. So I struggled on determined in my self-sufficiency.

Into my loneliness came an invitation to go to Grenoble. Gaby, my (supposed) friend from Lyon was inviting me to a ‘méchoui’ to be held at his cousin’s mountain house in a village outside Grenoble. I felt so keen to be out in the fresh mountain air that I could not get out of Paris fast enough. It was time to be a butterfly as Baba would have said ambiguously.

Gaby took some magnificent photos on this weekend, in particular of a memorable walk we all took up into the mountains. When he later sent me the photos I was struck by how alive they were. I was also worried because this supposed ‘butterfly’, looked troubled, fragile and not entirely well, as though the photos had picked up something intangible like an aura, a sick aura.

Still, I put these thoughts aside and returned to my Paris life with great optimism.

It was through the Escorial group that I made the brief acquaintance of Madame Héry and Mademoiselle Léger. We never got to first names. Madame Héry, with aristocratic kindness, said she might find a job opening for me at her office at Opéra. An appointment was made and one morning I found myself walking up a sweeping marble staircase and past some long, gilded mirrors, to Reception. Surely I belonged here. Doors were about to be opened before me. Madame Héry, sleek and smiling, was already waiting
for me. She ushered me towards a chair and disappeared. The Director appeared but had to inform me that, regrettably, she had nothing to offer me. I consoled myself with the thought that all this was taking place in French. Madame Héry then took me into her office and said she would contact a friend of hers who worked for a temporary job agency and recommend me. Over the phone she gave a most flattering recommendation. In true Parisian style she added, “Vous savez, c’est toujours par relation qu’on arrive dans le monde.” (It's who you know that counts.)

That same afternoon I presented myself at the agency at Montparnasse where I was asked, “Are you the Spanish bilingual secretary?” I was then asked to fill in a form, draw three trees and type a letter. The trees were for the psychologist. It was obvious from my letter that I had a long way to go in the world of typing, but when I spoke a few words of incorrect Spanish to the boss, who happened to have lived in South America, he told me that it didn’t matter because I looked nice.

It was at this point that I decided to buy a French typewriter which I carried back to rue Lecourbe. I bought it in Saint Germain and was delighted by the keys with accents on them and happily lugged it through the Paris decor knowing that I was a journalist or a professional writer who had just taken her first step into a very successful future.

After the next Spanish class, Madame Héry, Mademoiselle Léger and myself all went out for a drink in one of the spacious cafes that opens out onto the pavements at Place de l'Opéra. Madame Héry and Mademoiselle Léger were learning Spanish in preparation for a summer holiday in a villa on the island of Majorca. Madame Héry’s heavy French accent made any attempts to learn Spanish pointless. But then, it was people like her who were the lifeblood of Berlitz. I never actually discovered who or what she worked for. Or what Mademoiselle Léger did either. Mademoiselle Léger appeared to be
at a slight disadvantage in the Héry-Léger relationship, possibly because she was a ‘mademoiselle’ when she should have been a ‘madame’. Madame Héry was only a pseudo-madame. She had a boyfriend who came to pick her up one evening after the Spanish class. To my young eyes he looked too old to be a ‘boyfriend’. He looked more like someone else’s husband. Anyway, he was the reason why Madame Héry said, as the waiter placed our coffees and soda waters on the table, “I forgot to take it. I must take it now.” “Take what?” I asked. Now I should have known better. “The pill,” said Madame Héry. I was astonished. Where I came from in Sydney the pill was a more private matter. “You mean THE PILL?” She and Mademoiselle Léger looked at each other knowingly. “Vous êtes extra (‘You are extraordinary’),” they both murmured into their expressos. As I said, in Madame Héry’s eyes I was in need of guidance. I needed an income and then to be introduced to top level public servants who would transform me into another version of Madame Héry.

In fact, I had this dirty fifth floor flat to return to where I had to face where I was really at. Somehow it was hard to actually clean the place as had been my plan when Baba left. I needed someone else to clean it for. So I invited Catherine for coffee one Sunday morning in the grimy kitchen. The hour before she arrived was spent cleaning but I never let on and Catherine, of course, would not have noticed anyway. She said there was a good Czech film on in the Quartier Latin. So, after thick, homemade coffee, we set off to see ‘The Loves of a Blonde’, all in lyrical black and white and exactly mirroring Catherine’s ability to drift. After the film, we sat outside a cafe in place de la Contrescarpe (maybe Hemingway sat here too) and tried to tune into each other. We never quite succeeded. We had been lumped together but we knew we were not properly matched.

I also met up with Theodore’s friend, Solange, after work outside her office in Avenue Victor Hugo, one of the wide streets which led up to the Arc de Triomphe. It was still very light and unusually warm
and, while I waited, I looked into the designer label windows of a Ted Lapidus boutique. Like someone in a contemporary art museum I tried to fathom the connection between the stiff, unbeautiful clothes, the living human body and the life you actually led. That morning I had received a parcel of old clothes from my cousin Natasha. I was so touched, and then, as I pulled out the uneven blue summer skirt and the faded blouses, I realized how poor she was. Still, I wore the blue skirt all through the Paris heat. I felt less lonely when I wore it. Natasha’s beautiful name, the Russian connection, and her poverty, gave this skirt the edge over haute couture.

Solange emerged, and since it was so balmy, we sat in the outdoor section of a cafe and discussed which film we might like to see with the help of that week’s copy of ‘L’Officiel des Spectacles’. How very Parisian this all is, I thought in a very detached, surprisingly indifferent way. Solange, who had been married to an Italian painter, recommended Pasolini’s ‘Ucellaca e Ucellini’ which was on at the exotic looking cinema called le Pagode, shaped to look like a pagoda. Throughout the black and white film in Medieval-looking countryside the monk - was it Saint Francis? - and his young companion seemed to be studying sparrows. I felt slightly ashamed that I had taken so little notice of bird life up to now - especially tiny dull grey brown sparrows. How did these little creatures communicate with each other? The monk became more and more frenetic as he came closer to unlocking the sparrow’s secret. There was such joy at the end of the film. The monk had been tramping along this stony country road and he had found what he was looking for. How excited the Italian language became as the film reached its climax.

 Appropriately, after the film, we went to an Italian restaurant where we ate lasagne and drank muscadet wine. I listened to Solange but said very little myself. I had as much trouble communicating with myself as the monk had had understanding the sparrows, and I was not making any breakthroughs.
Solange’s husband had died. I looked at Solange’s kind, inscrutable face and wondered about life after death: how you live after losing someone you love. In a trance it seemed: Italian films, drinks after work in cafes, and a dutiful, humble dedication to the welfare of others. I dared not ask Solange more about her dead husband. Instead, I told her about Baba and how tired I was of hearing about Theodore. “Yes, death does rather put the lid on life,” replied Solange in her beautiful soft French.

Total independence, I discovered, was a trap. I had never before been so solitary. Paris as a backdrop was a kind of companion, but an impersonal one. I had it in my mind that I was a rebel and a non-conformist, irrelevant ideas that I had brought away with me from ‘home’. In fact, I was docile, responsible, and longing to belong. Before I got too lonely, I invited Catherine and Anne Kobylansky to dinner. I cooked them a complicated French meal which it was hard to keep hot while we talked over an ‘apéritif’ (I thought this was obligatory), and I found a forties style pink floral dress in a cupboard to dress up in. Was it my aunt Irene’s? Or Natasha’s? Too glamorous for Baba. Baba was strong, forthright and simple. Baba did not have my preoccupation with appearances. In fact, the dress only had a shabby kind of glamour.

As I waited for my guests to turn up, listening for the sound of the old lift doors, I hung out the window of the dining room into the warmth of the Paris evening. But it was too warm. Grey Paris did not look right for this heat. I felt very comfortable in my trance and the doorbell was an intrusion. I opened the door feeling mismatched with the role of young, sparkling hostess. Besides, I (and Catherine) were just about to be upstaged by younger Anne’s more than adequate social skills.

Anne drank and ate and smoked as if she had understudied an aging Simone Signoret and I was overwhelmed. How could I ever attain such worldliness? The cigarettes were lit too frequently, and
her tiny, chubby hands looked so experienced with the cigarette. Catherine sat silent and child-like. Anne asked me polite but interesting questions to get me talking and then glared at Catherine who had not yet learnt how it was supposed to be done.

Catherine did not smoke. She had enough to cope with as it was. She could not risk failing to get the lighter to work or failing to coordinate the smoking and the speaking. She needed some practice. I was impressed with Anne’s middle-aged act but not inspired to take up smoking.

At the end of the evening, Anne thanked me extravagantly and Catherine, after some thought, agreed. Yes, it had been a unique kind of evening: Baba’s flat, and this Australian who had materialised with a wealth of unrealised expectations written all over her face.

Anne Kobylansky, aged 18

Part of my new-found independence was to go to bed without doing the washing-up so that it hung over me the next morning.

This so-called spontaneous approach to life, I could see, quickly meant that I became disorganized and confused. Baba was not there with her visits to the church, her lunch hour and her quiet time to give me a break from my exhausting demons: ‘spontaneity’, ‘naturalness’, ‘rebellion’ and ‘non-conformism’.

Baba returned on a very hot day which made Paris look hazy and almost melting. After some sweeping and ironing and generally tidying the flat, I took the metro to the Gare de Lyon. I got a shock
when I saw Baba. The five hour train trip had been an ordeal and she was very white, as though all the blood had rushed from her face. She was also very thin and I realized that her ‘holiday’ had been a strain for her just as my month of being alone had been hard for me. We were both so independent that we did not admit what a lifeline we were to each other. Back at rue Lecourbe, Baba revived. As she pulled her old clothes out of her old bags, I was amazed at how much she talked to me about Natasha and her young family. I had so little to report. It seemed that nothing had happened for me. I was more surprised, though, when after only an hour’s rest, she shot up and out to the church (probably to pray for Natasha), and then dropped in to see ‘old’ Tatiana. These old people were deceptive. It was a younger generation who were staring at walls in despair, sunk in depression, lying in bed for too long.

The day before, I had spent my time walking to and from the Louvre where I had paid my respects to the headless, armless, legless Vénus de Milo and other Greek torsoes and fragments before heading off for the Watteaus which left me cold, and the Rembrandts which were a bit dark. I had walked home via Ecole Militaire, the Napoleonic military school, which always looked so stagey and barren and somehow hollow. I liked it best floodlit at night.

Baba had come back to Paris at the height of the heatwave. Some days it was 40 degrees centigrade and the heat radiated from the buildings and rose up from the cobbled streets and seemed to diminish the small areas of green of the city. In the early morning now they washed down the streets to give people a cool start to their day at least. And in the supermarket the supplies of mineral water began to run out. Paris was not prepared for this desert heat. The days were an ordeal. I began to visit the local pool and this was how I survived the heat, with one, sometimes even two swims a day.

I began a kind of swimming pool tour of Paris, thus experiencing a more mundane, shabby aspect of life in Paris. But I didn’t care.
The pool was the only way to survive this heat and I was not the only one to have this idea. The trip from one end of the pool to the other was often quite hazardous but my reward for my laps was to pull myself up onto the side of the pool in my tasteful navy blue swimsuit feeling serene and wonderful. I was then able to walk back to rue Lecourbe in spite of the heat. After a swim I didn’t walk, I floated - purposefully - with my short, wet hair plastered down very flat. Swimming made me feel very efficient and together and gleaming like an Antarctic seal. On one of these walks back, I was nearing rue Lecourbe when a voice called out ‘Alexandra’. It was Mademoiselle Léger of the Berlitz Spanish class sitting outside a cafe drinking her citron pressé (freshly squeezed lemon juice), the summer drink in Paris. She had very short Edith Piaf style hair. Someone French knows me well enough to call out my name across a Paris cobbled street, I thought.

On the coolest days my favourite walk continued to be along rue Lecourbe and straight ahead as far as Saint Germain des Prés, the Louvre or Notre Dame. “That’s the walk that Theodore liked to do,” Baba said approvingly, and I had the sensation, as I did for the nine months that I stayed with Baba, that I was following family traces, echoing past experiences. I was trying to find a firm, direct link with the Russian past but the time with Baba showed me that the link was mostly indirect, or inner rather than outer. The dirty, dusty, run-down flat at rue Lecourbe was full of ‘history’ but I knew that my imagination and its realities did not quite connect. My father could well have felt as much of an outsider as I often did. Or I may have been a privileged insider because of my unusual rapport with Baba. Theodore’s walks to Notre Dame may have been increasingly depressed, or, like mine, drained by lack of good health. The link for me with this attractive but disunited family was Baba. As I listened to her story I would try to read between the lines and give it three dimensions. Finally, though, I sensed, as Baba did, that what had
happened, events, were somehow incidental. Memories were of people one had loved or lived with or suffered or suffered with, and these people and what they were really like was impossible to recapture in words. I imagined that meeting Theodore was far more delightful than hearing endlessly about him. Just as hearing about my father could not compare with the greater experience of meeting him. But spirits were somehow tangible in Baba’s flat; so were personalities, talent, wit, rivalry and intolerance. I concluded, accurately, that one of Baba’s most peaceful and successful experiences of ‘family’ was with me.

When I reached the intersection of rue de Sèvres and boulevard Raspail, I would pass the ornate hotel Lutetia which had been Dadia’s first port of call in Paris at the end of World War Two. He had been arrested during the war and taken to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany for helping Jewish people register as members of the

*Pianoff family, c. 1930s: l. to r, Alexei, Dadia (Fedor), Theodore, Baba, Irene*
Russian Orthodox church. Baba had expected never to see him again. But he had survived and returned to Paris and taken the metro from Sèvres-Babylone to rue Lecourbe. When Baba opened the door she had wondered who this unrecognizable human wreck was. I could picture her amazement, her tears, her joy. She told me the story several times. And yet, I could get no picture of Dadia, of his thoughts and feelings, or of Baba’s feelings for him. I feared that I was seeing a powerfully disunited family that had suffered a lot.

Possibly I was understanding Baba’s story because we were similar: I wished I were less intelligent. Or less romantic. I knew it was a tricky mix.

Sometimes I went to the late Sunday afternoon organ recital at Notre Dame (as Theodore would have done), walking there and back. But mostly my walks had no destination and were the stuff of dreams for which romantic Paris was a perfect backdrop. And, looking back, this was my best and in fact most real and satisfying experience of Paris.

It was good to have Baba back again and she and I both revived from our individual ordeals and got back to the real business of living: in Baba’s case praying in the church (“that’s when I’m happy, Sonia”), in my case seeking out and mostly failing to find ‘life’.

The days revolved around lunch where we would meet up in the kitchen and I would laugh at Baba’s jokes. The nearest cross-street to rue Lecourbe was rue de Javel (pronounced by the French as ‘Rude Ja-vell’). During the Nazi occupation of Paris a German had approached Baba and asked “Bitte, wo ist Yafull Strasse?” Baba spoke German, so she was able to untangle his words. We both laughed until we cried.

I had not expected Alice Springs heat in Paris in June. I was psychologically unprepared. I longed for water and had to make do with mineral water and indoor pools. Was I missing Sydney’s beautiful harbour? The train trips over the bridge every day to Sydney
University had been, without my acknowledging it, a source of inspiration and reassurance. Like a great, fertile well, the harbour was always there. Now, unwillingly, I missed it.

I was worried about my ‘future’ and how I would organise it. Apparently I had little choice but to be an academic: the libraries were there, the books were there, and the work was waiting to be done. Like a docile, blinkered horse, the kind they used on farms to pull heavy ploughs, I tried to submit as destiny harnessed me.

One day at the end of an afternoon’s typing at Pigier, I decided to fill in some of my loneliness with a walk to across the Seine to the affluent Right Bank. The visit only increased my sense of isolation. In the National Library, the domed ceiling, the high shelves of books and the long wooden tables of purposeful note-takers puzzled me. I was wary of getting myself involved in some kind of hefty thesis venture. Studying the Spanish language was much more attractive. I pretended to read an anthology of modern Spanish poetry and continued to worry about LIFE and how hard it was to lead.

In the context of unsatisfactory life, Paris began to slip into the background. But my attachment to Paris’ mysterious charm was also very profound. I was a figure moving across a tapestry that had been woven over centuries.

The carefree aspect of leafy green Paris in the late warm spring only came to me in glimpses. Why couldn’t I be more like Jean-Paul Belmondo’s girlfriend in ‘Breathless? The actress’ name was Jean. She glowed with self-assurance as she floated around the film sets. In her pretty dresses and with her short haircut, she did not seem weighed down by impending scholarships and unwelcome research. She sparkled. In the film she worked for the New York Herald Tribune. So I bought a copy to read in the metro. It was too hot to walk, which I would have preferred. Next to me on the metro was a young high school student. He wore very thick glasses and he was very obviously trying to read the English language newspaper with
me. I gave up on the Jean Seberg fantasy and in a tired, middle-aged way handed him the Tribune. He explained to me in French that he loved languages and was studying English, German and Ancient Greek at a selective high school near Bastille, lycée St Merrie. “German, yes, I speak German too,” I said. “And I’m learning Spanish at the moment.” We both looked ahead, our eyes sparkling. Other people just didn’t know what it was like: the ecstasy of learning languages.

My social life limped along. One evening I went with André Kobylansky to a ‘spectacle’ (pronounced with a French accent) in which Anne was featuring. It was an evening performance on the lawns outside an old post house in the town of Versailles. Free and fluid, Anne stood out among the other actors as she stood on the stage set up on the lawn under the large old trees and artificial lighting. After the show came ‘la grande bouffe’ on tables set under the trees. André made it clear he wanted to be left alone. And I was relieved. Anne circulated. She had a strong personality and a strong voice and people felt important when they spoke to her. As she made the rounds, I got talking with a young technician who had helped to set up the stage lighting. I told him about the Spanish lessons I was attending (the then highlight of my life) and he told me how he had been to Spain and that it had been one of the highlights of his youthful life. We had both been moved by the spirit of Spain. Returning after midnight on the train with André, André conventionally commented that I had managed to pick up a boyfriend for myself. But, no, it hadn't been quite that.

I came back to my adopted den in rue Lecourbe, closed the shutters, recorded the evening in my diary, and wondered about Anne. The evening had been mostly dull and not equal to her outstanding talent with its very Russian stamp. I felt uneasy.

‘Cultural events’ were not really my scene in spite of my background. I was happiest sitting in Baba's kitchen listening or
talking, or shopping in the markets, or walking along the elegant Paris streets. The honours degree in French and the books I had read seemed to be an accidental background to a more domestic me.

The next event was an invitation from Solange to a concert given by the Italian pianist, Maurizio Pollini of Schubert's posthumous sonatas. I put on Natasha's uneven blue skirt and a t-shirt and added some navy blue plastic earrings and beads and navy blue espadrilles (which were the height of fashion) and caught the metro to Alma-Marceau where I met up with Solange. At the Champs Elysées theatre Solange introduced me to a group of her friends, including an elegant man called Jean-François. We discussed the programme together and I said expertly how I preferred the minor key in music. He laughed and said, “So you are like the French poet Paul Verlaine.” I was worried because I was so knowledgeable and scholarly that I actually understood this reference to Verlaine’s ‘mode mineur’. I would much rather have been just standing there dreamily in a pretty dress and asking, “Verlaine, who’s she?” So I tuned into Pollini and intense, passionate and moody Schubert. A lot of sheer hard work goes into being an artist, I thought. One would have to feel it was worth it. Or be desperate. Pollini certainly looked cornered. He was also brilliant.

I was stuck too in my way. I did not have enough outlets. So I went to the local library and took out some books on the lives of the French writers, Stendhal and Alain-Fournier. I skimmed through them, not wishing to get too involved. Alain Fournier had been killed in World War One at the age of twenty-nine. “I don't see myself growing old,” he had said once. I went cold all over. I was afraid of how one can know these things. The book on Alain-Fournier prompted me to read his romantic classic Le Grand Meaulnes. As usual with French novels I couldn’t be bothered using a dictionary, so only had a hazy impression of what was going on. In the case of this book my impressionistic reading style was very appropriate.
Books from the local library filled in some of the on-going loneliness of my first months in Paris. I stuck to my impressionistic approach to reading, selecting books with photos. Biographies fell into this category. One book which I did find myself reading word for word was a simple, direct account of the last years of Proust’s life as told by his charmingly named housekeeper, Céleste. There was a photo of her on the front. She was over sixty, and, like Baba, she had an unpretentious look about her. She wore a cotton patterned dress similar to the Soviet peasant toiling in the fields ones that Baba wore in the warm weather. And Proust, pale and sick and facing death, looked not unlike Theodore in the last years of his shortish life. What I recall most vividly was how Proust would repeat, “Ah, Céleste, je suis fatigué,” Céleste commenting that he hardly even had enough breath to say these words. But wasn’t I the one who was too tired, and too young to feel this way?

When my ‘activities’ ceased- the typing course and the Escorial Spanish classes - I faced a blank which the heat made claustrophobic. Some nights I could not sleep, worrying about the long summer and the future and whether my scholarship money would turn up in time. One morning I woke up too early, four a.m. and waited for the light. This is my chance, I thought, to buy the first, freshly baked croissants of the day. I went out into the eerie quartier to buy my croissants but it was a lonely gesture. I sat in the rue Lecourbe kitchen and prepared some very strong black coffee. My Paris life was becoming meaningless and I felt that I was wasting precious opportunities. To think that Paris could actually be dreary!

I did have a go at applying for au pair work over the summer in Paris. ‘Au pair’ work was possibly a must for the C.V. I had the impression it was about spending energetic but delightful times with a docile little girl, with me dressed for some reason in a very short skirt and possibly with a scarf around my hair. But I needed to head for a more stimulating option. Languages excited me so much, and
Europe, in contrast to Australia, had a different language across each of its borders. I was tired of Parisian French. Saying ‘I couldn't care less’ in French slang had lost its appeal.

The heat, the dry wind, the shrivelled leaves of the plane trees, all increased my feeling that I was living in a tinder box. I knew I would have to get out of Paris for the rest of the summer. There was a Spanish language summer course at Leon in the north of Spain. There was a German language course in Strasbourg. It seemed logical to go to Spain and to continue on in the Spanish vein, but for some reason Strasbourg beckoned and I found myself at the last minute buying my ticket for Alsace at the Gare de l’Est. I needed a holiday from French flair and narcissism. It could be quite refreshing to think about the meaning of life in German. Isn’t that what German speakers did? Like a refugee I packed my summer dresses, my jeans and an old shirt of Theodore’s that I had found hanging in a dark cupboard in Baba’s flat, and I fled.

On the day I left for Strasbourg, Solange turned up at rue Lecourbe to accompany Baba to the Russian cemetery outside Paris, Sainte Geneviève des Bois. Saint Genevieve of the Woods, what a beautiful name! Baba had described it as a beautiful place with many dead souls at peace. Here she would lay flowers at the grave of Dadia and Theodore.

The air already became cooler as my train left Paris. The scenery became very pretty on the five hour train trip, especially as we went through the fir tree forests of the Vosges mountains. German fairy tale country. When I arrived at the central station of Strasbourg, I had to catch a bus to the university. I was enchanted by this town: picturesque, peaceful, and somehow timeless, Strasbourg graciously swept me along. Now I plunged into a German conversation class as if it were a cool though rather deep swimming pool.

* * *
STRASBOURG

“Cafes, canals, and conversations”

The memory of Strasbourg is like coming across a group of musicians, harmonising beautifully, in a city street on a grey day. Something new happened in Strasbourg. I was looking for relief from what I had found to be a hard time in Paris and I could not have made a more perfect choice than Strasbourg. There was relief from the unusual heat in Paris, from the constraints of trying to be ‘French’, and, best of all, relief from worrying about the future. I had a strong sense that the future was not going to look after me.

Strasbourg was really not France at all. It was a part of picturesque Germany mingled with French elegance. Strasbourg had canals, pretty little arched bridges, wonderful museums and the stunning cathedral which had taken Goethe's breath away as it now did mine. Strasbourg was hospitable, and far more able to smile on its visitors than Paris. I felt very quickly very at home and felt ultimately more at ease speaking German than French.

I chose the ‘advanced’ German classes which were held in German, and I and many others sat dazed in our pews as Herrs Rosenthal, Matzen, Michler and Bodenmüller gave us of their best.

The language classes were held in a large nineteenth century building not far from the historic centre of Strasbourg. The high ceilings and tall windows made one feel serene and lofty. The sweeping staircases were generous and welcoming. It was a grand place but not an impersonal one. When the names Goethe or Mahler were mentioned, there was a sense that they were drifting around the building, thoughtful and inspired. Everyone walked around with the grace of the imaginary turn of the century attire which wrapped around you as you entered the building: billowing white blouses, long skirts, white shirts, the odd walking stick or hat. Boots with buttons.
The first teacher I met was charming, witty and extremely intelligent Herr Rosenthal. I literally stepped off the train from Paris and into his class. Luckily in his classes, handouts indicated what was going on: German ‘Politik’, the German system of education, the inevitable and confusing Women’s Liberation. Even in English I would have tuned off. I somehow managed to pick up the language without being any the wiser about systems or ideologies, but I admired Hamburg Dieter Rosenthal. He had us all so involved. His sessions were rowdy, turbulent and ‘committed’. By the end of the course I too was able to talk emptily about Fate and Democracy and Repercussions but Herr Rosenthal would have been disappointed at how little attention I was giving to the ideas he aired daily with us over the six week course. Instead, I felt deeply for him as he revealed that he was recently separated from his wife.

We were sitting with him in an open-air cafe across the road from the university and I tried to visualise a private life for this very
public personality. But it was summer too and we were all in sandals and shorts or dresses and I was soon distracted by the forceful voices of the Danish students who seemed to have invaded the German course. As we sipped our Schweppes or black coffee under the striped awning advertising Alsatian beer, I was puzzled as to why they had come to learn German and not French. In fact, it seemed to me they all spoke perfect German and English. Their spokeswoman, a vivid, dark-haired girl, who generously included us in her Danish court, explained that really they had just come for a minimal effort holiday. And Strasbourg was a perfect setting for us all. I found myself enjoying everything: the German, the company, the old city and its open-air cafes.

The teachers were memorable too. They were enjoying the relaxed holiday pace along with us. As a contrast to Herr Rosenthal, was our reserved but endearing Herr Michler who took us for sessions on German music and French-German translation. He was a lot younger than Dieter Rosenthal and a lot less worldly. Very tall and very thin, wearing rimless round spectacles, he was a ’musicologist’. So we enjoyed hearing about and listening to Bach, Mozart and Haydn, Wagner and Schoenberg. The translation classes were often very laborious and I quickly became one of the few to turn up when Herr Michler was ‘on’. I could not bear the thought of his having to face an empty class.

Our afternoon performer, Herr Matzen, set a different pace. He was not unlike a wolf, a real Alsatian perhaps, and he told us that his thick straight grey hair had once been very black. The immediacy with which these teachers related to us was delightful. Herr Matzen took us for sessions in the language laboratory. He would come round behind us (the young women, that is) and put his hands on our bare summer shoulders before whispering into our ears the perfect German pronunciation.

His performances were the best, the most dramatic. He had a
poetic and picturesque way of expressing himself and we watched him stride up and down in front of us, quick and energetic. Herr Matzen put Alsace on the map. It was here, at Sesenheim, that Goethe had met Frederike who was the inspiration for so much poetry until, suddenly, one day, Goethe’s love ran out. My heart fell with Herr Matzen’s as he stopped still in front of us. He also described to us Christmas in Alsace with a fervour and respect for tradition that moved us all. I think he summed himself up perfectly when he was explaining to us in German the meaning of the word ‘fressen’ (devour):

“Ich esse nicht, ich fresse.” (‘I don’t eat, I devour’).

He was dramatic, warm, human and comfortable.

Finally - and romantically for me - (there is a huge amount of psychodrama in the classroom), was Herr Bodenmüller. Herr Bodenmüller was married and everyone was disappointed. Black hair, dark eyes, pale olive skin, well-built. I spoke longer sentences in German in his class than I have before or since. Herr Bodenmüller, unlike Herr Matzen, had been tamed.

These stimulating German classes were a background to the huge amount of socialising which became the real raison d'être of the time in Strasbourg.

On the very first afternoon, I met up with two imaginative and very charming Australians, Janette and Helen. Dieter Rosenthal, like all skilful language teachers, had used my arrival in his class as a conversation piece: O.K., so I’d just come from Paris, and my name was Russian, but, in fact, I was Australian. “Ach, zo... Australien (Ow-strrar-lee-en).” Friendly Janette introduced herself, “I’m Australian” she said, as though she were a national emblem. I had forgotten all about Australians.

Like me Janette and Helen were students and very keen on languages. Janette had been travelling around Europe with Helen and they had come to Strasbourg because it offered both French and
German courses. Helen had enrolled in the French classes and I found myself in the same class as Janette. I could not have been happier at this lucky coincidence.

The three of us were staying at the Cité Universitaire which was about twenty minutes walk to historic Strasbourg and the university. We did this walk each morning together. From my room, which was high up, I had a view over the old city and the cathedral. The view was yet another part of the very good luck which marked my time in Strasbourg. In the evening and early morning I could hear the bells of Strasbourg cathedral. It was a reassuring sound. I was not missing Paris at all.

Many of the warm evenings were spent in the beautiful Alsatian outdoor cafes of ‘Old Strasbourg’. You could order onion soup and Alsatian Riesling served in pretty German-style glass goblets. One cafe was situated in the cobbled plaza leading up to the front of the cathedral which was floodlit at night. The cathedral looked like a
radiant ice-sculpture smiling graciously at our happiness. A young French woman dressed in the popular blue jeans and white shirt, was playing her guitar and singing for us. It was a clear night and the stars in the sky seemed just a continuation of the illuminated cathedral. She sang:

“There was something in the air that night, The stars were bright, Fernando . . .”

It was a song you heard a lot at that time and Helen and Janette, always entertaining, loved to send it up, swooning as they sang ‘Fernando’. Still, the song captured the spirit of those evenings. Norbert, a student from Göttingen, was less susceptible than us to Fernando. With his extraordinary English, he spoke at great length about Economics, which he was studying. He sounded as though he knew what he was talking about, and I was very impressed.

After my loneliness in Paris, to meet so many young people and to see Janette and Helen every day for coffee, or lunch, or dinner, or all three, or a visit to the cathedral, or a talk late at night in their rooms, was sheer bliss. They both brought with them a sense of family. They became home. Being relaxed and friendly, it did not take them long to attract two Tunisian suitors, Idi and Assan, who smiled a lot and were keen to act as escorts to and from university restaurants. Janette, short and round, seemed to have a shape which men felt comfortable putting their arm around. Helen was very tall with long, dark hair. She was very romantic in a semi-serious kind of way. She must have understudied her father to perfection: the humour slipped out of her as though she had grown up sitting in the back row of a boys’ classroom or passed the time in the change room of a football team. She was subtle, the jokes were not. It was a winning combination.

Janette and Helen quickly became the centre of a large group. People who would have passed each other by dismissively were actually talking to one another. I dropped the Parisian act and allowed
myself to speak English. This is how I met Irish Orla, South African Anita and Renda, English Philip and Elizabeth, Canadian Marlene and Dutch Robert. Janette’s room became an Australian-style salon where she offered us all instant black coffee in plastic cups with plastic spoons. Sitting on her bed, we aired important issues like our star signs, what our handwriting revealed about us, and later in the night our fears, and our dreams. Janette received it all, at the same time serious and humorous. Helen had this quality too, understanding that we were all at all times both pathetic and wonderful.

One colourful day followed another and I became completely absorbed in this temporary life. An English couple hired a car and we all set off for a picnic in the fir-lined fairy-tale Vosges mountains. Janette and Helen both had beautiful singing voices and they had us all singing songs in English, French and German, our voices carrying between the trees. We also drove to Heidelberg one day and our German did survive the border crossing. We were able to speak with some real and friendly Germans. Heidelberg did not recognise us as its own, as Strasbourg did, but nevertheless was happy to allow us the freedom of the city. We took a brief boat trip down the Neckar and I sat next to the distinguished Dutch Robert. He explained to me how the Dutch, belonging to such a small (and easily submerged) piece of land, and having a language which so few people spoke, worked very hard at mastering other languages, in particular English.

English Philip invited us to a delicious French meal which he cooked himself. We drank the local Alsatian white wine and listened to Vivaldi and Beethoven. We were all at our sophisticated best and approving winks and glances from our High Priestesses, Janette and Helen, confirmed this. Wearing Helen's bright red Indian dress for the evening, I glowed with happiness. Robert leant towards me and in his impeccable English he said, “I don't know where to place you, Alexandra, but I certainly know where not to place you. You are European. You are of the Old World, definitely, not of the New. Yes,
that’s it, you are made to live.” Made to live . . . and I believed him.

So much living happened during those weeks in Strasbourg. The charm of Strasbourg grew and I never felt like a stranger there. Sitting alone outside a cafe in the historic place de la Cathédrale, I would catch up on my diary or write postcards blending happily into the scenery.

Then there were the museums. They were small and numerous and beautifully set up in the old houses of historic Strasbourg. Best of all, we never set out to self-consciously visit them, discovering them more by accident. The museum associated with the cathedral was set in a sixteenth century house and garden and as you wandered through there were glimpses of the cathedral from different angles through its windows. Statues of extraordinary angels and saints buoyed you up and carried you through the day. The Alsatian museum was also captivating. Set up in a pretty Alsatian house overlooking one of Strasbourg’s canals, it had window boxes of bright geraniums which suited perfectly the traditional pottery and folk art of Alsace.

Helen and I were lucky to attend a lecture on the history of the cathedral given with the unbeatable French talent for packaging by the French curator for museums in Strasbourg (at the time), Jean-Louis Faure. He had the best job in the world - and it showed. His joy at the treasures of Strasbourg cathedral flooded over into us and Helen and I were delighted that he was often at a loss for words. “Le mot m’échappe,” he confessed to us. We were ecstatic: even French people, ‘connoisseurs’, could be at a loss for words, and in their own language. Not just us! We emerged from this session with substantial linguistic egos and went off for another black coffee in a historic cafe. When I went back to my room, I found a letter pinned to my door. I’m important, I thought. The letter was signed, with a dramatic flourish, ‘Jean-Louis Faure’. In the dark room while showing us slides and groping for words he had fallen in love with me. He expressed himself in a very literary fashion which seemed to
fit but his French was not quite right. I recognised Helen in the large, generous handwriting with lots of loops and I laughed.

The Danes went back to Denmark before the end of the course and their departure was as dramatic as their presence. They came to say good-bye to us, the English speakers. By now I had recovered from my shame at being a speaker of English. I remember that the vivid Danish girl had struck up a friendship with Irish Orla. She said an affectionate good-bye to Orla and promised to send a postcard, adding, “I wish you happiness. Something tells me you deserve it.” This friendship was unusual though because the Danes tended to stay together like a clan. They seemed very sure of themselves, very strong and attractive and all looking as though they had been born by the sea and in the sun.

Orla looked fragile but she had a surprisingly strong, forthright personality. I listened to her with a mixture of respect and foreboding. In some way, as yet undefinable, she reminded me of myself. “I wanted to be a dancer but after my father’s death I was diagnosed with tuberculosis. You are lucky to have choices, Alex.” I drew back the curtains on my empty Paris stage and felt bewildered. I was full of hope, full of expectations, but words could not convey the sense of inevitable failure which I had about my future. It was a relief to remember that Orla and I were both still sitting in a sunny outdoor cafe in Strasbourg.

At the centre of our Strasbourg life stood the cathedral. We would walk past it or through it often. Once inside, I and Janette and Helen and many others felt swept up in its inner life. We were even inspired to go to mass there early one Sunday morning. The mass was held in French, German and Latin. After our spiritual food we headed back to the student restaurant for the lentils and not quite fresh bread which appeared so often on the menu. As we walked back, we sang from the mass, “The Lord has freed his people, alleluia, alleluia”. We sang the ‘alleluias’ very professionally with priestly intonations.
We were, after all, professional language students. Over the summer, in the evening, there were ‘Sound and Light’ shows in the cathedral giving us its history. I happily went along to both the French and German versions, but the German version was more beautifully done which seemed appropriate: Strasbourg, I had decided, was definitely a piece of Germany.

Officially, however, Strasbourg was in France and Strasbourg university, along with all the other universities in France, had a high quota of Arab students. Many could not afford to return home in the summer break and this was how we met Ezzedine I and II and Aadel. They were the very best introduction to a very different culture, so that later, when I returned to Paris, I was sad to find that many Arab students had not transplanted so adeptly as these three.

I met Ezzedine almost as soon as I arrived in Strasbourg. He was parking his bike (Strasbourg was nice and flat and ideal for bike-riding) outside the university restaurant. Being very friendly, as Tunisians especially were, he greeted me and asked me what I was doing in Strasbourg. Before long Ezzedine I (he seemed to be the ringleader) and his friends were joining us for meals and black coffee afterwards on the plastic-covered cafeteria tables. They were a highly organised trio with rules and regulations for everything: for friendship, for courtesy, for living it seemed. Ezzedine I was a mathematician though the term ‘magician’ would have suited him just as well. He had a very powerful personality to match his thick, black, henna-d hair, black eyes and olive skin. He was very good-looking. He enjoyed talking to me about religion. Possibly I looked like a lost soul. “Religion,” he said “binds together.” Then he took some postcards I had with me and held them in a fan shape: “Here, where the cards overlap, is religion. At the other end is individualism. These days the overlap has diminished. Where we meet we call it humanity.” I was terribly impressed at Ezzedine’s mathematical ability to understand and organise his world. For me, religion was
candle smoke, cathedrals, stained glass windows, and rules and regulations that you ran away from. It was a new idea to me that it had anything to do with humanity.

Our lunchtime friendship with Ezzedine and his friends culminated in an invitation to a Tunisian meal in their rooms. Aadel was at the door to greet us dressed up in white Arab robes. For a moment it was as if Strasbourg cathedral had dissolved and a mosque had taken its place. In the kitchen the couscous was being prepared. We were ushered into Ezzedine’s room and sat on cushions around the low table. Ezzedine put on some Arabic music and the delicious meal was served. To finish, we were served mint and verveine tea made from dried herbs sent to them from Tunisia.

I was very caught up with Ezzedine I and surprised that I would be. He fascinated me. He was almost hypnotic. He seemed such an unlikely presence in domestic Alsace. But it was a magical, harmonious time, when Australians, Danes, Arabs, and the charming German teachers mixed happily and lightheartedly. Serene Strasbourg seemed to bring out the best in us all.

As we all arrived sadly at the final week of the summer school, we had to face the inevitable ‘exam’. What our friendly teachers did not tell us was that we would all pass. Everyone passed in summer. So we revised and practised over black coffees in pretty cafes and got depressed that the exam itself failed to reflect our moments of brilliance.

After the exam there was time for a week of good-byes. Herr Bodenmüller presented us with our ‘diplômes’ and then took us all to the cafe across the road for a farewell drink. He was less diffident and more relaxed on his last day and we had a marvellous time speaking with him in German. In my mind I reluctantly gave him back to his wife.

Janette held an evening session in her salon where we had to finish off her supplies of nescafe, tinned peaches, and, oddly, a bottle
of Corsican liqueur which inspired us into singing German songs.

We all exchanged addresses, even with people to whom I only spoke for the first time as we wrote down the address. Alsatian Herr Matzen said courteous and impressively restrained good-byes all around and, fatherly, gave us all huge ego boosts before we all dispersed. Ezzedine came round to my room to say good-bye and took my address saying that he could well be coming to Paris to visit some friends later in the year. “You know, Alexandra,” he said, finally, giving me what must have been for him the ultimate compliment, “you would have made a great mathematician.”

As I sat in the train I knew that I was saying good-bye to one of the happiest moments in my life. I was in tears. So were Helen and Janette who had come to wave me off. “Don't worry,” said Janette, “Helen and I will be seeing you again soon in Paris.” And they did come to Paris but it was never as light-hearted or uplifting again. What was missing? The cathedral? Vital Herr Matzen? Or was it a state of innocence which Strasbourg allowed us?

* * *

Paris was intriguing and glamorous and impersonal as I stepped off the train and dragged my bags through the metro and back to rue Lecourbe.

A very alive-looking Baba greeted me and I spent the evening in the uncomfortable philosopher’s chair talking with her. I felt really quite downhearted to be back in Paris but I comforted myself with the thought that Paris for me would be a bigger and better Strasbourg.

* * *  

‘Ma liberté neuve m’emprisonne et me paralyse’

‘My new-found freedom imprisons me and paralyses me’

Albertine Sarrazin
I imagined that I had a series of urgent matters to attend to, but I might as well have been in the Australian outback for all anyone seemed to care. I reported to the office that dealt with ‘assistantships’ and the ladies looked up from what might have been their knitting and told me that the school term did not begin for another month, so why the hurry? I turned my attentions next to the Sorbonne and once again the message was, “No hurry, no worry”. A sixth sense indicated to me that neither the assistantship nor the impressive-sounding ‘post-graduate’ studies I would be doing, would fulfil their promise. There was no promise in fact and the experienced French staff were making this very clear. In a specifically French way there were a lot of frills and very little heart.

I was glad to have rue Lecourbe as a home as I set out each day into Paris to organise my new life. And Baba continued to be interesting. Over lunch she would inform me of important events such as Mao’s death, keeping as she did a close watch on exits from and entrances to this planet.

I went out one day and visited the Cité Universitaire on the edge of Paris and was lucky to see it first in late summer. The huge number of trees in the grounds were a relief after the bareness of Paris. It might be more ‘authentique’ and ‘romantique’ to live closer to the heart of Paris but if I wanted to meet other young people, the Cité U was the obvious starting point. I had already investigated other options, reading the Share Accommodation section of Le Figaro over breakfast. I had been shown a room in a luxurious fifth floor apartment in boulevard St Germain. I had visited a ‘studio’ but its view onto a blank wall made me feel lonely.

I felt unsettled. I seemed to have lost my heart to Strasbourg. An unexpected visitor distracted me from my feelings. “Someone turned up asking after you,” said Baba. “His name is Geoffrey.”
Geoffrey? I knew him from Sydney University but I did not realize he knew me well enough to appear unannounced in Paris. Baba did not have my carefully placed series of social hoops through which prospective friends had to jump before being allowed ‘in’. For her it was perfectly natural that unusual people turned up at her door.

When I answered the door, there was Geoffrey with his bags looking pale and pathetic and fairly sure that his charm would get him a few nights at Baba’s flat. I took him into the kitchen, scene of all the best exchanges, made him some coffee and listened to his adventures in the south of France. He was discovering Europe for the first time but he seemed to feel very at home too. I was sorry that I was not more genuinely interested in his anecdotes but my mind was too taken up with wondering what he was actually doing in Paris. What about his life in Sydney? And his wife and young son? I was reliably level-headed, more so than Baba who fell for his Dostoyevskian chaos. Was Geoffrey another Theodore? He was a similar success story with the Kobylanskys when we went there to dinner. André and Geoffrey were able to discuss European philosophy to their enormous personal satisfaction. The names Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer cropped up. Geoffrey’s French was unique but by some act of grace it worked.

After Geoffrey and I left the Kobylanskys, we found it such a beautiful warm night that we decided spontaneously to walk to the Eiffel Tower. We passed the Napoleonic military school which looked magical lit up at night, like a stage set. We then sat and had a drink in a nearby open-air cafe within sight of the illuminated Eiffel Tower before walking back to rue Lecourbe. Geoffrey continued to speak to me, in French, and, since he talked a lot, I didn’t mind whether it was English or his peculiar brand of French. My reservations were quickly squashed by Baba. I needed to remember that he was still young (unlike me), also that Baba was not interested in hearing anything against someone who had delighted her so much.
Tuesday, 14th September

The beginning of the school and university year was marked by the filling in of forms, piles of them. It took me a whole morning to complete all the forms in order to secure a room at the Cité Universitaire.

The afternoon was taken up with Stage I of enrolment at the Sorbonne. I graduated to Stage II and was handed another pile of forms to fill in.

The following day I was handed my key to room number 19 in the Collège Franco-britannique. It was a gloomy 1930’s style room on the first floor, smelling of polish. Enough to dampen any Parisian dream. I had the very unrealistic idea that I would transform this room into a kind of retreat where I would get some real ‘work’ done. I am amazed that I took myself seriously. Sometimes one has to. Part of the ambitious Paris dream was that I would find myself effortlessly producing some original and inspiring research.

The college itself was a depressed-looking dark brick building. It was supposed to look vaguely British. The Spanish college next to it, a flaking white cement palace, looked so much more romantic, but the windows were boarded up. General Franco, Spain's fascist leader for as long as I had been alive, had died the year before and the college itself, weed-ridden, was still making its political statement to us all - as was the gloomy House of Cambodia, which was also closed. I did not yet understand how subversive the tradition of student life in Paris could be. The trees and grass of the Cité softened the edges of the mostly uninspired buildings. When I discovered later that the Cité Universitaire had been the Nazi headquarters in Paris during World War II, I was not surprised. To my mind the whole place had never quite recovered from this invasion.

Geoffrey helped me to drag some of my heavy bags through the metro from rue Lecourbe to my new home. Having my own things
around helped me to feel hopeful that this room would soon feel like a home.

So here I was: a foreigner among foreigners.

Saturday, 18th September

When I returned to rue Lecourbe to pick up the last of my bags, Irene had arrived from New York and she and Baba and Solange were just setting out to visit the graves of Dadia and Theodore at Sainte Geneviève des Bois. Irene’s powerful stage personality filled the flat and Baba was unusually quiet with her daughter. I suddenly felt very homeless. Geoffrey turned up, again happily distracting me from my feelings. With his intentional help and actual hindrance I was finally able to clear out of rue Lecourbe, feeling emotionally very confused. My life at rue Lecourbe with Baba had come to a sudden end with Irene's arrival, and a very different life at the Cité was about to unfold.

Monday, 20th September

On my first full day at the Cité, I walked around the park, finding it a rather unreal place, and wondered about all the Danes, Swiss, Brazilians, Syrians, Germans, North African Arabs and Mexicans I might soon be meeting. The trees in the park of the Cité were just beginning to turn gold. Autumn in Paris had a different kind of romance to spring but one which was more real to me: golden autumn turning to stark winter - deep down, at the time, that, for me, was life’s reality.

Then back to my room to write some letters - for the moment, these were my friends. Then my first meal at the huge restaurant of the ‘International House’. A nice gentlemanly Tunisian student was opposite me and I spoke a little with him. The Arab students from North Africa do tend to be very friendly, I thought. At dinner an
equally friendly black African student sat with me. Was he possibly over-friendly? And yet, the enormous, impersonal student restaurant of the ‘Maison Inter’ with its noisy trays, wet knives and forks and tough duralex glasses, was overwhelming if I did not at least smile at someone.

I could see, too, that I was going to have a problem: how was I to find the man of my life in this kaleidoscopic crowd? For all I knew I might meet men of my life and be faced with impossible choices. Or, my man might never touch a university restaurant because he knew of better ways to survive in Paris. Or I might be so overwhelmed by the endless sea of impenetrable faces that I would, out of sheer panic, end up with the wrong man and so blight my glamorous chance-in-a-lifetime to study in Paris.

The fresh September weather inspired me the next day to get out of the Cité which was somehow a world apart from the rest of Paris, and walk through the 14th arrondissement (the Cité’s locality), drinking in once again the streets of Paris. I was meeting Geoffrey and Catherine for lunch at a restaurant in the rue du Bac near the Quai d’Orsay on the left bank of the Seine and it was a pleasure to walk there. We seemed to make a wonderful trio and I knew I would miss Geoffrey when he went back to Sydney, in spite of being puzzled by his presence in Paris in the first place. After lunch Geoffrey accompanied me to the Ile de la Cité while I went through Stage I of applying for a Resident’s Card. This mostly involved standing in queues (while Geoffrey did all the talking) and getting some photos taken at a photomaton. Geoffrey then came back with me to the Cité U and watched me do some ironing before dining with me at the 'restau u' (restaurant universitaire). His companionship was a great comfort to me. I underestimated it at the time. My mind was on higher things.

I spent the evening in my room getting confused over Stage II of my enrolment for the Sorbonne.
Wednesday, 22nd September

Finally I tried to obtain my resident’s card at the Ile de la Cité. This took three hours and at the end all I received was a temporary card. However, the setting in which one waited could not have been more beautiful. The queue overflowed into the very heart of Paris’ cobbled history. Paris knew she was worth the wait. From here I went to rue Lecourbe where I lunched with Baba and Geoffrey. I felt lost and depressed by all the forms and cards which seemed to form a barrier between me and life in Paris. I was on guard. I had some presentiment that I was leaving the personal and familiar for the impersonal and unfamiliar. Geoffrey and Baba were too busy enjoying each other’s company to tune into how I might feel. I felt lonely with them.

I was preoccupied, too, with my latest idea: how to enrol in Spanish studies at the Sorbonne. In the afternoon I went to the ‘Grand Palais’ to enquire about Spanish studies only to be told I had been directed to the wrong place. Exhausted, I returned to my room at the Cité U. Going out to dinner in the evening, I suddenly felt unreal and, as I walked up the stairs to the restaurant of the Maison Inter, I felt a complete outsider and a real foreigner among all these Arab men. It was such a strange situation. Not what I had imagined at all. Once again for the meal I had the fortune to get into conversation (in fact, it would have been hard not to), this time with two Lebanese students who invited me to coffee afterwards. We spoke over ‘un café’ and they introduced themselves with impressive formality, Hassan and Ra-ad. My name, ‘Alessandra’, seemed to be very internationally acceptable. The place where we sat to have coffee had a Middle Eastern feel to it which was enhanced by the large number of Arab students there. The high ceiling, tiled floor and square dark wooden tables and chairs seemed to have been designed for the heat. A few palms, and we could have been in Alexandria.

If you were a student in Paris, the Arab world was inescapable.
Not that I wished to escape it. I felt more optimistic now that my months at the Cité U would be a succession of fascinating encounters over small cups of black coffee. In a way I was right.

Thursday, 23rd September

Today I received my first letter at my new address, from Baba. How lovely! As I was picking it up, I was approached by a neighbour, shiny, round Alphonse of the Ivory Coast, who hailed me as “ma voisine, nous sommes sur le même palier”, (my neighbour, we are on the same floor). He was quick to find out my room number with the mysterious pronouncement: “La vérité se trouve toujours à la frontière” (We find truth at the frontier).

I spent the day completing my enrolment and obtaining, finally, a student card. I also made enquiries about courses in Spanish or German but failed to find out anything that would actually help me. The system was designed to put you off enrolling in courses. I was crestfallen that my presence in Paris was so undervalued by the French government.

Geoffrey turned up in the evening and together in the pouring rain we set off to the university restaurant. I was able to wave to my Lebanese friends of yesterday but then lost them again in the huge crowd.

Friday, 24th September

Today I made another attempt to obtain my resident’s card. It was 11 a.m. when I arrived at the Préfecture de Police on the Île de la Cité and the queue dismayed me. So I decided to go to rue Lecourbe and see Baba instead. The compactness of Paris plus the outstandingly efficient metro and bus systems meant that I could be very mobile. Baba insisted I stay to lunch. Then Baba and Irene went out while I was left to clear up in the kitchen! I felt rather desolate to be left
with this Cinderella role. I returned to my room in the Cité U feeling that nowhere was home and spent a lonely afternoon writing letters and tuning into French and Italian radio. But my current love was still Spanish, though some Arabic could be useful as part of a Cité Universitaire survival kit.

The weekend however was very social and I was a Parisienne again. I met Geoffrey and Catherine at metro Convention in the 15th arrondissement for coffee and then we spent some time on a river boat seeing Paris from the tourist’s point of view. We made a very lively and harmonious group. We returned chez Kobylansky for dinner.

When I finally returned to the Cité U on Sunday evening, I was quite happy to receive a visit from Alphonse. Alphonse took this as a cue to join me for breakfast the following morning.

Tuesday, 28th September

Today I was to attend some orientation lectures for English language assistants. But my mind was elsewhere. Now that I was at the Cité U I felt I had to politicize myself, so on the metro I determinedly read Le Monde. Also I felt I did not know how to talk to men and discussing political events might well be the way to go.

There were a series of talks on the teaching of English. How complicated the teaching of English could be made out to be. We were expected to convey the differences between French and English stress and intonation to groups of rioting thirteen year old Parisian high school students.

After the lectures I met up with some fellow assistants, among them some Australians who felt just as disoriented and preoccupied as me.

When I returned to the Cité U, Alphonse was there to greet me. After drafting a letter making enquiries about areas of research
at post-graduate level at the Sorbonne for supposedly literary-inclined and keen students (i.e. myself), I took myself off to the 'restau u' for dinner where I was joined by (yet another) friendly Tunisian student.

Thursday, 30th September

Today I farewelled the other assistants and we separated on our uncertain ways. I then spent the afternoon making another attempt to find out about language courses at the Sorbonne for people like me who wanted to learn Spanish, German and Arabic all at once and in French. When I returned to the Cité U, I found a letter awaiting me from a professor Héger of the Sorbonne. He was a specialist in Medieval Studies and he had taken my letter to him enquiring about areas of research very seriously. Far too seriously. He suggested a text for me to look at - Lancelot - an example of Medieval secular didactic prose-poetry which I would find at the National Library. How had I given the impression that this was what I was interested in? Then I was to make an appointment (the French word, ‘rendez-vous’ sounded more fun) to see him.

The university year was just around the corner and I still had no idea what to enrol in. I had dinner with another friendly Tunisian student and we had coffee together afterwards but this event clarified nothing.

Indeed, the college was filling up for the beginning of the term, and, being ‘britannique’ its corridors were suddenly filled with Oxford and Cambridge accents. Their English sounded so beautiful to my ears. I had never before thought of the English as foreign, but now they appeared to me gentle, almost ethereal, and attractive - like their language. I could see how the French might envy English subtlety and poetry. I got talking with a very nice Oxfordian (aren’t they all?) who was doing a post-graduate degree on ‘Atticism in French Music’ i.e. musical scores produced in Paris attics - Saint
Saens, Ravel and Fauré. He was a musicologist: sensitive, intelligent, everything you could wish for. But where, I wondered, did they get these wonderful titles for their research? No titles came to my mind, only frustrating blanks. Besides, did I really want to delve deeply into Atticism in French music?

I discovered that there were three university restaurants. There was the enormous Maison Inter which would not have looked out of place in Disneyland. From the outside it looked like a deceptively calm haunted ‘château’. It seemed to be most popular with Arab and Iranian students. In fact, waiting in the queue holding onto your lunch
ticket was rather hazardous: the entrance hall was always full of intense, dark-eyed Iranian students screaming “Shah fascisti” and throwing pamphlets around written in Persian and French about the struggle of the Iranian people - “Long live the struggle of the Iranian people!” , “Vive la lutte du peuple Iranien!” The floor was always littered with these pamphlets and the political temperature was so high that I soon stopped eating at the Maison Inter and chose the smaller, pleasanter ‘restau sud’ (south) or ‘restau ouest’ (west). It was when I was first trying out the ‘restau ouest’ that I met a charming Lebanese student. Unfortunately his timing was very bad: I had already met one ‘dragueur’ too many and become wary. (A ‘dragueur’ was a hazard for all women students and was identifiable because he would approach you as though you were the lucky winner in a lottery and he was the prize. He began a conversation with a well-practised formula such as: “You wouldn’t be Tunisian by any chance would you?” or “Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?” or “Do you come here often?”) So I told him that however nice he was, he was still a dragueur. He looked exasperated and said, “Look, how am I expected to meet anyone if I don’t talk to them?” I saw his point and regretted my words. But it was too late. I lost him in the surging crowd of the restaurant and never saw him again. What if he had been my man? I returned to my room and tried to make myself read Le Monde. Politically I was non-existent and I wanted to be able to participate in all those political discussions which I thought were part of student life in Paris. I even breakfasted over Le Monde and decided to make a habit of this. Le Monde would have to be one of the most demanding newspapers in the world to read and its very seriousness kept dragueurs at a distance.

Monday, 4th October

My next attempt at locating an area of post-graduate research led me
to the National Library where I did a surprising amount of reading without exactly feeling that Professor Héger’s suggestion of a study of Medieval secular didactic prose-poetry excited me. Why hadn’t I chosen something more detached and straightforward like Mathematics? I spent the evening talking with Ivory Alphonse but was too worried by his body language to take in anything that he said.

Tuesday, 5th October

I gave Medieval secular didactic prose-poetry another go just in case . . . but found myself feeling depressed by my clearly unacademic leanings. My interest in the Middle Ages was purely visual and romantic, something summed up in the magical tapestries of ‘The Lady with the Unicorn’ which were in Paris. What I needed was a Medieval tapestry-making course.

As I walked from the National Library towards metro Châtelet in the heart of Paris, I tried to sort myself out. With my love of languages, the closest I could get to mathematics was linguistics. Maybe I could get excited about linguistics?

I was very impressed, as one could not help but be, by the large, stylish and clever advertisements which covered the curved walls of the Paris metro stops. I wanted the sophisticated, super-cool, almost brittle but always successful life they hinted at. I especially liked the one for a drink called ‘Marie Brizard’: “La force de Marie Brizard c’est sa faiblesse pour la glace” (Mary Brizard’s strength is her weakness for ice). I longed to have this strength: to be strong enough to have weaknesses.

The linguistic analysis of a few clever posters, however, was not enough as the basis for a whole thesis but I still fantasized and tried my own captions. There was a perfume, ‘Je Reviens’, and I pictured myself in a moment of inspiration standing at a half-opened
door saying to a most attractive man: “Je reviens comme le parfum”

Instead, I returned to my room at the Cité U and got out the educational supplement of Le Monde and was giving myself a heavy dose of that when there was a knock at the door. It was Catherine Kobylansky. Now this was more like it. Not long after, Geoffrey appeared and the three of us went out to a local cafe for a meal of steak frites and red wine and a dynamic three-way conversation.

Friday, 8th October

The day I finally obtained my permanent resident’s card was cause for celebration. This time I arrived at the Préfecture de Police on the Ile de la Cité very early. The queue was still daunting but by lucky coincidence I ran into another graduate in languages from Sydney University and we were able to keep each other company during the long wait. To celebrate, we lunched in a chic crêperie in the rue St André des Arts and had some wine which went to my head and made me feel wonderful. I imagined many more heady days were to follow: Paris was accustomed to being viewed through a haze of cigarette smoke and alcohol.

Now, as a more permanent resident of la République, I made the trip to the Banque Nationale de Paris at its headquarters in Place Vendôme. For superstitious reasons I felt that my finances were more secure if I dealt with them at the source. This bank was very elegant both inside and out. The staff were immaculate and threatening and customers were addressed strictly as ‘Madame’, ‘Monsieur’ or ‘Mademoiselle’. As it turned out, there had been an error on their part and I had more money than I thought. But how could the computer have made an error? ‘Ça arrive, ça arrive . . .’ It happens . . . Even the headquarters of the bank were not flawless. So, to celebrate, I went to the department store, ‘Printemps’ (‘Spring’), and bought myself a pair of black corduroy jeans - when worn with a
white shirt and boots these were the latest French fashion. I then caught the bus back to the Cité U, dreaming out the window all the way instead of reading Le Monde.

My room I decided needed to look gayer, more ‘gemütlich’ (cosy) as Baba would have said using her favourite German word. With postcards, posters and prints I soon had the place looking like a travel agency. I contemplated my newly arranged room in the evening light before setting off bravely to dine again at the impersonal Maison Inter. I was fortunate enough this time to be seated opposite a real, live Frenchman who was doing his doctorate in ‘Économie appliquée’ (it sounded to me like some tricky kind of craft). He seemed very nice and, furthermore, he shared my love for German. Unlike the Arab students however (especially the exceedingly friendly Tunisians), he did not invite me out to coffee after the meal. And I did not dare ask him. According to the etiquette guidebook which I carried around in my head, they had all the say and you had none. No wonder the Arabs liked me.

The next morning was my first taste of life as an English language assistant. In the staff room of Maurice Ravel high school the head of the English department, Monsieur Métais, with his very wordy flow of English, took us along to the translation class for his trilingual secretarial group. Then we were introduced to a typical high school mob and I confidently told myself that once I got the hang of them, I was sure to enjoy teaching.

That evening after dinner, Geoffrey came over to the Cité U and we went out for a coffee in a nasty little cafe with a jukebox, a pinball machine and some disintegrated-looking Arabs with their blonde girlfriends. Geoffrey would be returning to Sydney soon. He envied me my French government award which had given me the chance to really live in Paris and to become part of the scenery. As I look around the seedy cafe I am less convinced than he that I am experiencing the chance of a lifetime. But I am . . . I am . . .
I was awoken the next morning by a phone call from Helen to say that she and Janette had arrived in Paris. I was overjoyed at the thought of seeing them both again. But everything was happening together, almost too much so. Geoffrey was about to return to Sydney. My assistantship was about to begin. The university enrolments had started. As I moved from the Cité U to the high school, to the Sorbonne, to see Baba, to meet up with Helen and Janette, I was exhausted but also relieved to be in no one place long enough to think too much.

I received a disappointing letter from one of the professors of ‘Linguistique’ at the Sorbonne and realised that my idea of a mathematically-oriented linguistic understanding of human nature was not to be found in Linguistics. Or anywhere. Astrology was probably as close as I would get. I decided I needed some real ‘orientation pédagogique’ (best translated in my case as ‘vocational guidance’) so I set off for Place Jean Calvin, the central nerve of the Sorbonne, where I squeezed a bit more information out of the system. When dealing with French bureaucracy, I had discovered, one needed to be impersonal and relentless. After emerging from a fruitless interview with a woman in the Linguistics department, who should I run into but Catherine Kobylansky who had just finished enrolling in Lettres Modernes (i.e. Arts). Remarkably unflustered. Then again, she did not view the Sorbonne as a glittering stepping stone to a brilliant career. Did I? We stood there in what looked like a public amenities block scrawled from ceiling to floor on every wall with hideous grafitti, and as I looked around me at the sheer vandalism that had been wreaked on the building, I sensed that, for me too, the real education would be outside and not inside the famed Sorbonne. And I would not have wanted it any other way.

Together, Catherine and I set off for Geoffrey’s hotel. I felt tired, depressed and, thanks to the system, pedagogically lost. But still prepared to keep up the battle. Together we all made the gay taxi
ride to the airport and made our very sad good-byes to Geoffrey. I will miss him a lot, I thought. As he goes, my link with my life in Sydney feels even more tenuous.

* * * *

It was becoming urgent to enrol in something. Strictly speaking, I had no desire at all to study, but I kept this to myself.

After doing the required number of hours of presence at Maurice Ravel High, I set off for the Sorbonne in search of further information. The first concept that I had to grasp was that ‘the Sorbonne’ did not exist. There was no building or part of Paris you could point to and say, ‘This is it. The Sorbonne. Historic and prestigious university of Paris.’ No, the Sorbonne was everywhere and nowhere, scattered all over Paris. Completely elusive. There were sections, Paris I, II, III, IV and so on. How I even found out that much is miraculous.

I took the metro to Châtelet and in tearing wind walked across le Pont Neuf. Paris looked so poster beautiful. At the Institut de Français, another section of the Sorbonne I had found out about, I managed to get a stage nearer to a contact - a telephone number. I was lucky enough to get onto a Mademoiselle Ben and to arrange a rendez-vous with her. On my way back to the Cité U I bought a second-hand copy of Claude Simon’s novel, La Route des Flandres (The Road to Flanders) in boulevard St Michel. The little I read on the bus trip back I found reasonably interesting. André Kobylansky had mentioned Claude Simon's name to me as a notable living French writer and had liked this novel.

I spent a reflective and lonely evening in my room. What was I doing at the Cité U somehow cut off from the real Paris? Why did I feel obliged to enrol? A visit later in the evening from a ‘britannique’ mathematics student, Edmond, convinced me however to give the Cité U a chance. I had, after all, only been here a month.
Sunday, 17th October

This morning I had breakfast with three Lebanese students, Samir, André and Jean. Jean looked cool and mysterious. I liked him immediately. He spoke of the sympathy one person can feel for another in the space of a minute, a day, a few months, and how separation does not impair this link. “a vous arrive?” (‘Does this happen to you sometimes?’) he asked me. “Oui, ça m'est arrivée,” (‘Yes, it has’) was my shy answer.

Samir said he was going to drive back to Lebanon and would I like to come on the most beautiful route in the world: the French and Italian Côte d’Azur, the then Yugoslav coast (after Venice and Milan), the Greek coast, Turkey, Istanbul, Damascus, and finally Lebanon. Would I go? Yes, yes, of course!

I should have gone but I had an appointment with Mademoiselle Ben. I had located a human being within the system. As it turned out, I liked her very much. However, my choice of a topic for research was unfortunately not to be based on compatibility. She was a specialist in ‘methodology’ but told me that if I was interested in ‘structuralism’ (her diagnosis of my hand waving), I would need to go to the more ‘progressiste’ New Sorbonne, also known as Paris III. She gave me a few addresses of possible thesis directors. She also recommended a few writers I might wish to read, Le Clézio, Albertine Sarrazin and Claude Simon. Time was running out. It seemed I had no choice but to follow through her suggestions. So, on my way back to the Cité U, I bought Le Clézio's novel The Trial about a sun-drenched young man who lives by the sea and has a real relationship. I also bought Albertine Sarrazin’s popular novel The Ankle Bone. Albertine’s story had the sad ring of experience. The young Algerian girl is in a juvenile detention centre and she escapes by jumping from a high wall. But her escape is less than perfect. She breaks her ankle. She is able to have a taste of freedom thanks to a
young man, Julien, who picks her up. He understands her very well because he too has been ‘inside’. ‘Albertine Sarrazin’, the name sounded so romantic. She walked with a limp. Part of me, I knew, was an Albertine Sarrazin.

Helen came and stayed for a while at the Cité U. One evening we went out to dinner at an Italian restaurant in the Quartier Latin called Santa Lucia. We went with some ‘britanniques’ from the college and Helen delighted us all by singing ‘Santa Lucia, pass me the beer’. Halfway through the evening two singers came in with guitars and gave us a wonderful harmonious performance accompanied by the waiters. I never enjoyed myself as much as I did when I was with Helen or Janette.

When Helen left to do some more Eurail travelling around France, I was back to dining alone at the university restaurants, a stranger among a sea of Arab faces. I also returned to speaking mostly French, thus cutting myself off from a group of people I might really have been able to talk to.

Teaching, or rather trying to teach English, at Maurice Ravel High was at first thoroughly confusing. I was able to share this experience with the English assistant, Julie, and we frequently escaped to the Café des Sports across the road from the high school to come to terms with things. Julie was grave and quietly spoken and insular in a very English way. She did not have this Australian openness to ‘culture’. She had strayed out of an Arthurian romance and she drifted, short-sighted, round the school in her blue jeans with long fair hair floating around her shoulders. She came from a narrower background than mine but she knew her way around. She was not in fragments all over the place like me, though she did appear very vague and watery. She gave me the definitive and official British put-down on French popular music. It was awful. I was still at the stage of thinking anything was fine so long as it was in French. Julie described the current French singers as ‘drips’. ‘Tears’ would have
been a kinder word. French singers sounded quite depressed.

The first days at Maurice Ravel High were taken up with clarifying the timetable and my first experience of being alone with 4C was unnerving. I was happy to move on to yet another rendezvous with a Sorbonne professor, this time, finally, professor Héger, the Medieval specialist. I frantically read up on Medieval French literature in the metro so as to retreat with grace. Monsieur Héger turned out to be a very kind man but he depressed me by saying that he felt I would do well and should most certainly pursue my studies to the Doctorate level.

The next day I received in the mail a beautiful print of Renoir’s ‘Le Moulin de la Galette’. Helen’s thank you for sharing my room. I put it up on my wall wistfully. My Paris and Renoir’s were worlds apart. Culturally inspired though, I set off to visit the Musée de Cluny and had an unforgettable time discovering the originals of the strange fifteenth century tapestries of the Lady with the Unicorn. I was fascinated. These tapestries were enchanted. I felt uneasy and spellbound as I watched them - move?

I came back to the Cité U going via the windows of a bookshop near metro Luxembourg showing the life-size photos of some well-known French writers. Le Clézio looked as handsome and as tanned as I had expected him to be from his book. But the photo of Samuel Beckett was the most striking. A tortured, penetrating, self-conscious almost reproachful look at the photographer who will blow up his photo and stick it in a bookshop window.

Thursday, 21st October

This evening I was to have my date with destiny and I was extremely nervous about it. There were distractions at the Cité U. André, one of the Lebanese trio from Sunday morning breakfast, called on me and together we visited a friend of his, Faez. Then Marie, an African
girl, asked me if I could help her with her English for her thesis.

My first view of professor Moatti as I entered the lecture hall, Amphi B, of the New Sorbonne was unfavourable. We went to a cafe and she heard me stumble nervously through my French. I found her so contrary to anything I wanted but I made a valiant effort to keep our rendez-vous afloat. I think she was making some sort of effort too: “Are you sure you're not a butterfly?” she asked warily. I was astonished at this image of me. It seemed I was unlikely to be one of her assets. She could not make sense of what I was trying to say, which is not surprising. “It sounds like you might be interested in structural analysis of a literary text”, she suggested. I felt I did not have much choice but to say ‘yes’. I had read Claude Simon’s novel so she alighted on this text. I had the impression she was not particularly keen on him. I said I preferred Le Clézio but she wanted to keep him to herself. She told me she was particularly well-read in the area of structural analysis. She was rigorous and hard to please and a bit frightening, probably just what I needed.

I was woken up the next morning by a knock on the door. It was Alphonse who wanted to introduce me to his fiancée (I was surprised), Christianne. She was French and she was studying to be a high school English teacher. She imagined that as a native speaker of English I possessed inside knowledge on the playwright Arthur Miller. Over breakfast she listened intently as I tried to sound authoritative.

With the university year beginning, the college was becoming very full and I was beginning to feel less alone. That evening, quite late, there was a knock on my door. It was my Spanish neighbour from just opposite. He invited me in for a drink with his friends and I had a really lovely evening. I hope I see them again I thought as I went to bed.

I did not have to wait long. The very next evening ‘Vittorino’ invited me in again to join him and his friends for a drink. I was sorry to have to say no. Exhaustion had caught up with me. If I had
stopped to think, I would have observed that my tiredness was unusual. I was, however, too hectically busy to stop, and too worried about missing out on my part in the life carousel. I was in a hurry. I did not know why, but I was.

After a morning’s ‘teaching’ at the high school, I would take the metro back to the Cité U for lunch and a chance to link up with someone. In the queue one day for the university restaurant I met an English student from Oxford who said he was investigating the influence of Dante on Romantic French literature. As good a reason

Victorino

to come to Paris as any. Mike himself was quite a romantic figure in his huge dark overcoat, rimless nineteenth century spectacles, and with his very pale English skin. But Romantic French literature sounded so dull to me and I pitied poor Mike for the research which lay ahead for him. I was so polite, I did not want to disturb his image and ask him what he was really interested in. I felt I had met a misguided fellow-plodder.
I wanted to spend each day bounding around, flitting from one metro stop to another, working, studying, socialising, and fitting a whole youthful lifetime into each day. For some reason, my strength ran out too easily.

Friday, 29th October

Today was my last chance to finalize my enrolment. I was now faced with the unwieldy task of transferring my enrolment, in other words, re-enrolling. I had prematurely enrolled at Paris IV: the lovely old building was my idea of what the Sorbonne should be, and the few people I had spoken with there had been (a rarity) both courteous and human. Madame Moatti, my now official thesis supervisor, was courteous but not quite human, I felt. She was to be found at Paris III, the place which looked like the site of a previous civil war.

Alvaro
As with the resident’s card, I sensibly imagined that the earlier I arrived at Paris III, the ‘New Sorbonne’, the more efficiently things would proceed. Of course I got it wrong. If you read on, you will find that I got a lot of things very wrong in the following months. The woman at the office screamed at me and told me the office I needed only opened at one thirty in the afternoon - the logical time for a student office to open its doors. I felt like bursting into tears.

I went back to the Cité U for lunch and to regain my composure and was lucky to dine with two big-hearted and humorous Chinese students who made me laugh a lot. They were from China. It was the first year China was sending students to Paris and they stood out in the crowd in their plain Mao suits. I returned to the New Sorbonne where as calmly as I could I went through the endless process of filling in forms to obtain a student card. Twice I took a break in a nearby cafe where I addressed twenty envelopes and organised my pile of forms. This approach worked: I came away with a student card, also with a greater understanding of the important role of cafes in Paris life.

The student card was a rite of passage. I was in. That same evening I knocked at Victorino’s door. His name was Victorino and not ‘Vittorino’. It had not taken me long to fall for this Spanish mathematician.

Victorino was to be found at the shining centre of a solar system of Spaniards, if not, as I came to discover, an entire galaxy. I caught the name of one of the planets, Alvaro. He was tall, dark, dignified and reserved - just what you imagined a Spaniard to be. He introduced himself with great courtesy and told me that he came from Sarragossa (to be pronounced very quickly with rolling ‘r’s’). Was his gentle dignity characteristic of many Spaniards, I thought? But I did not stay long. I felt so overwhelmed by Victorino. I met Alvaro again the next morning at breakfast. I told him that I was planning to visit an oriental carpet exhibition in the north of
Paris at the Porte de Clignancourt. Since when had I developed this intense interest in carpets? Alvaro said he was intending to visit the markets which were in the same area. It was a coincidence, so we decided to set off together. After investigating the carpets and exploring the nearby markets, we lunched together in a café. Alvaro told me a bit about himself. I was amused that a real doctor had come to Paris to do his ‘doctorat’ and we both laughed about that. In fact, he was a psychiatrist, and he was doing research into psychosomatic causes of illness. What does psychosomatic mean? I asked.

Alvaro was approachable, interesting, and safe, so I was happy to join him again that evening to see a film on Jean-Paul Sartre called ‘Sartre on Sartre’, which was screening at the House of Brazil. However, we arrived too late to see the film (probably a blessing given the title), so tried out an ‘Iranian evening’ on at the Maison Inter. We both found this rather too exclusive in that everything took place in Persian. On our way out to find a café, we stopped outside the Swiss House which had been designed by the famous architect, Le Corbusier, and we tried to come to terms with its design. I was puzzled as to why it was famous. I could see why the Collège Franco-britannique was not famous (except for its inhabitants, of course), but the Swiss House failed to inspire too.

It was here that we ran into Victorino - and, naturellement, he had a girlfriend, Amparo. She was a medical student from Valencia, in Paris to see Victorino. I would have travelled a long way too to see Victorino. I felt as though I had. Amparo was slim, petite, serious and dignified, with long, straight dark hair. Not only did she look very appealing but also so right next to Victorino. I was slim, serious and dignified with straight dark hair too, but I did not have her Spanish. I only had my couple of months of Berlitz Spanish with the ‘Escorial’ group at Opéra. Not quite enough to cast a spell.

We all went and had coffee together in a nearby café, one of
many, many cups of coffee that I was to share with Alvaro and Victorino.

The next evening there was a knock on my door. Victorino was inviting me to join him and his solar system for some Spanish cognac. Amparo had returned to Valencia that morning but the partying continued. Of course I said yes. I was entranced by this Spanish Woody Allen with his transparent face, keen grey eyes framed by rimless spectacles, and wild frizzy hair.

With the closing down of the House of Spain next door, Spaniards seemed to have, osmosis-like, been absorbed into the Collège Franco-britannique. In fact, Victorino’s window looked onto the Maison d’Espagne. When I came in, Victorino was sitting there in his brown corduroy trousers, red and white check shirt and ‘sensible’ sturdy brown lace-up shoes (I loved his shoes!) - a kind of Spanish uniform I thought - pouring drinks. And seeming, as he always did, to radiate outwards as though he were on fire. His room was untidy. There were shoes all over the floor and copies of Le Monde on his unmade bed (so I was on the right track with my reading of Le Monde). A shirt hung out to dry in the window which looked out onto a lovely young autumn tree. Victorino reminded me of the autumn. I imagined I was like the young tree. There was a large potplant under the rays of an electric lamp. “Artificial sun”, said Victorino as he gathered up some glasses to wash them in the basin. “What kind of plant?” I asked politely. “It is the plant”, he said laughing wickedly. “Maria y Juan, Marijuana!” He spoke so quickly as though he had to fit as much living as possible into a very short space.

The room seemed to be full of Spanish students. Corduroy trousers or jeans, check shirts and flat leather lace-up shoes were what you wore. Everyone was chattering in fierce Spanish. They all smoked, they all had sudden moments of sombre silence. “Hostia!” (best translated as ‘!’) Victorino would say when someone made a
joke. Or, more irreverent still, “Hostia puta madre!” (Your mother is a prostitute) adding “My parents wanted me to be a priest but I loved the Virgin too much!” Then he gazed across at me waiting for me to reveal something about myself. But I was too busy computing how to sum myself up as neatly as he did. I felt too unwieldy to reveal.

For me Victorino felt instantly like home, my safe harbour.

“Let us dance!” said one of the girls. “You dance, Delphina!” She glided across the room dancing with her arms and hands. They all clapped her. “Now, you dance, Alessandra!” said Victorino. I could not look straight at him. I already loved him too much.

My strong feelings for the Spanish students were immediate and enduring. They were warm, down-to-earth, gregarious, simple and serious young people, and in some way they matched part of myself. When I was with the Spanish students, I felt I was with people who had strong roots and powerful links with their land and its past. I had a sense that centuries of Spaniards had gathered in this way to share silences and exclamations and a kind of immense pride in simply being Spanish.

The next morning was a beautiful, clear blue cool autumn morning. I was back in Paris. The leaves falling from the trees were brittle autumn gold or brown and cracked as you trod on them. Catherine Kobylansky floated over to the Cité U and together we visited the local botanical gardens which included a small zoo, in the Jardin des Plantes. We were accompanied at the last moment by the English mathematics student, Edmond, who liked the look of Catherine. When we had had enough of miserable caged animals, we went to a tea room attached to the mosque in the fifth arrondissement near Jussieu which was also the name of one of the mysterious ‘sections’ of the Sorbonne.

As we drank our mint tea and pretended we were in Morocco, I thought how Catherine, with her black hair, olive skin and almond-shaped dark eyes seemed perfect for the decor. “People never know
where I come from but usually they end up saying I’m Turkish.”

I came back to the Cité U and washed my hair, my way of trying to think things through. I determined that tomorrow (always a good day) would be the day I would begin to work on my thesis . . . - called more evocatively in French a ‘mémoire’. When Jane knocked on my door to invite me up for coffee with a ‘britannique’ mob. Jane was not English as I had thought, but Australian from Canberra. Tall, willowy, delightful, she had gathered together a group of lonely people, or as she put it, “We are all lonely, if only we’ll admit it.” She then supervised us into cooking a meal which we all enjoyed with a lot of very cheap red wine. And an Oxford student (Richard was his name) with stylishly cut slicked back blond hair told me how he felt like jumping into a red sportscar and zooming up the boulevards. I could see his scarf flying in the wind but I was not next to him. He was wasting his time with me. I had had the misfortune to find Victorino.

The next day I actually did surprise myself by doing some work at one of the university libraries. It was a relief, too, to find that the area of research, this ‘Structuralism’, was not such a mismatch for me.

My days were so full, so chaotic. At every turning there was someone new to have coffee with. I lost my equilibrium. I could not bear to miss out - but I did. I missed out on so much.

Inspired by the windy autumn weather and the swirling leaves, I took myself off on a long walk up one of the boulevards near the Cité U. Life was brimming over and so full of promise, and I had such faith in that promise. I bought myself some sandshoes so that I could join my new-found Spanish friends for ‘le footing’ (jogging). I saw the way to a man’s heart as being through on-going reading of Le Monde and serious before dinner sessions of jogging in the park of the Cité U. I was on the wrong track there.

I became confused and over-tired from too many late nights but
I still dared not refuse any of Victorino’s invitations. Every moment shared with Victorino was precious.

He dazzled me. He did not look Spanish at all: not dark and sombre and humourless, but his soul was Spanish and the Spanish students loved him. He had something which I have never seen to such a degree in anyone before or since: he had charisma. Energy shone out of him like electricity and if I had believed in halos then he had one. If I could come within his radius and catch his love, I was privileged. He never lost this aura for me, he never became ‘just Victorino’.

He had pale skin, and a fragile but resilient look. He had a lot of very curly almost red hair. He looked like an angel. He had a big, almost Jewish nose. The Spanish language bubbled up from inside him. He talked a lot, responding to people at their deepest level. He responded to their souls. Later he said to me, “We are all the same inside, you know, we just have different ways of showing it.”

When I met Victorino, he was celebrating life. Maybe he always had. Everyone was enjoyed. No-one was dismissed. His warm compassion gave his room a glow. I envied his free spirit. I wanted to be like Victorino, I wanted to be him. Where Victorino walked, the waves parted before him. Here comes Victorino, I thought, there goes Victorino. Everyone should know. But students who were not Spanish seemed to pass him by. Their lives did not come to a standstill simply because they crossed paths with him.

But I was unlucky. I did not choose unhappiness, unhappiness chose me.

Unfortunately for me Victorino kept ‘Spanish hours’. Real socialising began at about 10p.m., more personalized socialising after midnight. We talked for hours and hours. I was not getting enough sleep. Victorino was concerned for me. I should have been more concerned for myself. “Alessandra,” he said, “you could have the men of Paris at your feet, so why do you want to be with me?” Because
I was unlucky. ‘The Men of Paris’ (whoever they were) were eclipsed by Victorino’s dazzled face as I entered his room. I told him that I did not know how to relate to men and that I was rather a difficult person to get along with. “But you're easy. You’ve got everything a man would want.” I was overwhelmed by Victorino’s attention, but disbelieving: that he could think I was wonderful too, this seemed impossible.

Amparo hung between us and divided us like a wall. “And what would you do here with me?” Victorino asked sensibly. I was at a loss for words. For me the point of Victorino was simply to be with him while I could. That was enough to go on with. Sit quietly in my tight jeans, sandshoes and pink t-shirt and listen to him carousing with the Spanish contingent, making me jealous as he poured drinks or lent over the coffee table - very close - and lit cigarettes for the strong-voiced, matter-of-fact girls who dropped by in their tight jeans, and bask in his radiance as he would catch my eyes and say to anyone present, “Now, she’s the one with the intelligence, she’s more intelligent than all of us put together” or “Alessandra has fire, hidden fire.”

I found Victorino irresistible. I simply could not be ‘sensible’. “You know,” he said, as we lay together on his bed at 1a.m. when everyone had finally dispersed, “love does not exist.” This took some thinking about. Then he explained to me how we are all selfish, but some are selfish in the short term - ‘court-e term-e’ in his incorrect French, others in the long term (‘long-ue term-e’, also incorrect). I loved the way he irreverently mispronounced the French, rolling the r’s. I understood and appreciated every nuance of his humour and pathos. I was his perfect listener.

Victorino had made a decision to be selfish in the long term. He looked at me intently and said, “Don’t you ever think about death? Or about growing old alone?” I felt I would be failing him if I were to say ‘no’. Then he added, “You are everything I’ve ever wanted but
Amparo is Spanish and I already know her. We can make love in Spanish.” Victorino sounded slightly married and I felt sad. All my instant powerful feelings for him seemed to be squashed, I would have to carry around inside me, mostly unexpressed. “So, then, what is life for you?” “Alessandra, I don't know why, but you make me cry with this question.” It was a risky kind of bliss to lie on his bed and talk like this, and I went back to my room trying to brush Victorino aside.

I was in some need of ‘orientation pédagogique’ when it came to men, but, since the Sorbonne did not offer this kind of course, at the time I was there at least, I enrolled unofficially with Victorino as my mentor. Thanks to his guidelines, I botched it completely.

My ‘man map’ was probably unusually blank, and where it was charted it had some dangerous reefs (real and imagined) which prevented me from ever stepping ashore. I was quite literally all at sea. It did not take much to capsize my fragile boat as it set sail in the whirlpool of the Cité U. And it took even less to knock my confidence. My feelings about men and myself in relation to a man, that was my ‘achilles heel’. As is the case for all of us, the part of me that was most receptive was also the most easily damaged.

The Spanish nights took their toll. I had to be at the high school at 9a.m. but I was not. I must have had an efficient look about me though, because the headmistress would smile approvingly as I walked intently past her office at 11a.m. “She’s always on time, this one.”

It was going to be hard to fit it all in: reading Le Monde, reading for my thesis and attending seminars, pretending to teach English at Maurice Ravel High, and being unable to refuse Victorino’s midnight invitations. Why did he have to wait till midnight? Sometimes it was earlier and I joined the Spanish students for Spanish cognac and Spanish cigarettes, ‘Ducados’. If I drank enough of the cognac and smoked enough of the cigarettes, my system would be so saturated
in things Spanish that I might be allowed to make love in Spanish. I would listen to the rumble of Spanish punctuated by ‘Hostia!’ and ‘Hostia puta madre!’ Victorino seemed to have it in for virgins in general.

In the midst of all this, I ran into Irish-American Anne. She probably gathered a lot of people up in her wake since she had a lovely, sensitive and compassionate face. Looking back, I realize that such faces were few and far between. Leonardo da Vinci would have sketched her as one of his angels. Anne was lots of things which I found out about all at once over lunch and coffee. She was deceptively reserved. “I write poetry,” she said. I was very suspicious: where was her thesis topic and her seminars? She told me her parents were recently divorced and that this had disoriented her. She had studied in England and had linked up with an Indian student. “He was nice, Alex, but he wanted to control me too much. How can you figure out what they’re like before you get involved?” She was speaking to the right person here: with my foresight, I knew not to get involved with anyone. “And there was another man, Alex, but he turned out to be gay. How can you tell if they’re gay?” In spite of all this confusion, she seemed to fix herself up with a very nice man very quickly. ‘How do they do it?’ I thought as I floundered around with ambiguous Victorino. The late autumn of Paris had inspired us both. “I love this time of year!” I said with great feeling - probably the only feeling I dared convey - “It’s a time of anticipation,” said Anne with her writer’s gift for choosing an evocative word. But the anticipation was not in the season, it was in us. We were setting out, hopeful and keen to explore. Paris for us was our city of anticipation.

If I had been less ‘man-oriented’, I would have seen much more of Anne. I waved to her from a distance, said warm and enthusiastic ‘hellos’ when we ran into each other, and acknowledged her as a kind of soul-mate. I saw her as a very open person where I felt very closed.
One evening - or should I say morning? - Victorino suddenly said to me, “Alessandra, would you live with me?” I felt seasick. I wanted to say ‘yes’ but I was speechless. What had happened to Victorino’s plan about being selfish in the long term, and his recent discovery that love did not exist?

The next day I received a letter from the local hospital asking me to call in because my chest x-ray had not been satisfactory. I was worried and set off immediately to get the results of my TB test which was compulsory for all students. That was fine but the doctor asked if I had been feeling unusually tired. I did not want to talk about my Spanish timetable. I was asked to make an appointment for further x-rays. I tried not to think about it. I had too much life to get on with.

That evening I joined Victorino as he was preparing coffee for a group of Spanish friends who were coming round later. After a very emotional day I had finally found the words I needed to answer Victorino's question of the night before. This is how I will always remember him as I stood right up close to him against his home-knitted jumper watching him go through a kind of ritual with spoonfuls of coffee, Duralex glasses and sugar. I had on my Spanish uniform: the tight jeans, the t-shirt, the sandshoes - nice and flat because Victorino was not very tall and I was by Spanish standards very tall. “Victorino, je t’aime beaucoup, beaucoup.”

“Is that so?” he said looking straight ahead.

As I sat silent and intent among the Spanish students, I knew Victorino would always go back to Amparo. I felt sad. The Spanish jokes were beyond me. I could not laugh. It was after midnight again when Victorino accompanied me back to my room. He put his arms around me, and we were both in tears.

The next evening I was back in Victorino’s room. Victorino’s brother, Jesus (Ha-suss), turned up. He was nothing like Victorino, but like Victorino he had a vast store of proverbs to guide him through
life: “We are all ships passing over the surface of the water; if we seek to explore the depths, we risk going under.” Unforgettable stuff, and disturbing. Victorino was keen to get me linked up with someone. The thought of me alone in my bed at night irritated him. He suggested his brother Jesus, then Alvaro, Miguel, Miguel-Angel, and Alfredo. Victorino told me that the best way to meet a man was in bed. “You need to go to bed with a lot of men.”

I continued to join Victorino and Alvaro and now Jesus for coffee and tried to achieve the impossible: to be detached about irreplaceable Victorino.

* * * *

If I could not have love, there was always work. I needed to take an absorbed interest in the literary seminars I was attending on ‘Style’. These seminars had crept up on me. It was a shock to emerge from the Spanish bunker into the grey, often depressing light of Paris, and to realize that I actually had enrolled in a course that really was being held, and which other students seemed to be taking seriously. I arranged to meet one of the French students to ‘discuss’ the seminar. I was impressed by her French articulateness and togetherness. How could she concentrate on the seminar when the place was alive with passionate Spaniards? Was there something wrong with her? Or was it me? Was there something wrong with me?

My Paris life suddenly looked grey when compared with colourful Victorino. I caught up with Catherine Kobylansky, catching her as she drifted out of our sordid section of the Sorbonne. Her seminars seemed as irrelevant to her as mine did to me. We sat opposite each other in the Café de la Faculté drinking coffee and eating ‘tarte maison’, both underslept, both knowing that our ‘real life’ was taking place at one remove from where we were.

I helped a student from Ghana, Victor, with his English
translation of Samuel Beckett’s Molloy. I linked up again with shiny Alphonse who invited me to a spicy African meal and more conversation with Christianne, this time on Thomas Hardy’s Jude the Obscure. Jude must have appeared very obscure to her and I sympathized.

So no wonder when Victorino invited me for midnight coffee that I was drawn in again to the Spanish bunker with its intensity and fire. But it all seemed incompatible with my more superficial and yet more objective Paris life.

The late nights and the sadness over Victorino took their toll. I had flu. This did not stop me from turning up to Alvaro’s November birthday celebration. I quickly linked up his star sign, ‘Scorpio’, with his profession ‘psychiatrist’. I was surprised that no other women students were present. I should have left but I saw Victorino who came up to me, put his arms around me, and said, “Alessandra.” I was so confused. Victorino held onto me but kept saying, “Alessandra, who will you sleep with tonight?” He was high on marijuana. A cigarette was passed around. Everyone was very intent, very serious. Victorino was delirious. I felt the marijuana drain me of all initiative and I felt at odds with its effects. There was no glow, no ecstasy, just a very dull feeling as though I had been dumped. Alvaro, experienced doctor that he was, explained to me that it took perseverance to build up to the real benefits of marijuana. I was sure of one thing only that night: marijuana was not for me.

As I left to go back to my room, Alberto, an Argentine psychology student, left too. I thought he was nice. The effects of the marijuana allowed him to speak his mind to me. He did not seem to be pleased with me at all. What was I doing at the reunion when I was the only young woman and had not gone off with anyone in particular? I seemed to have crossed a boundary and displeased the gods. Desperate to please, I said, “Alberto, will you sleep with me?” To my amazement he seemed only too keen, and I knew immediately
that this is not what I wanted but I did not feel free to change my mind.

Alberto filled me in on a few elementary points: how normally speaking there was a build-up to making love, and how the relationship you have is worth more than the ones you have not got. I found it difficult to agree with either of these points but I took it all in. Spending the night with an attractive and considerate Argentine was surely the dream of many young women, but I was worried and even more so when Alberto was pleased with our night together. I froze. Still, we both spoke French extremely well.

It was Saturday morning, time to see Catherine again and to talk and talk freely about anything except what was really on my mind. With Catherine I always felt I was experiencing the real Paris: its glamour, its picturesqueness, and its depression. At Sèvres-Babylone Catherine and I dined at an elegant cafe called ‘Sip’. It had mirrors, full-length windows looking onto the intersection of the streets Sèvres and Babylone, and pale gold and imitation marble decor. I sat opposite the decorative Catherine feeling like a waif, unsure of where I belonged. The Spanish students seemed to belong to another world. I simply could not see Victorino in his colourless raincoat and sensible brown lace-up shoes, eating pâtisseries and drinking coffee at ‘Sip’. Alberto, in his smart jungle green army disposal store raincoat would have been a much more appropriate escort for this setting. Why, then, was I proceeding through this Saturday as though he did not exist? And why was it so difficult to find a man who suited the ‘decor’ of your life whom you loved as much as Victorino? I felt lost.

I arrived back at my other life at the Cité U late that night and ran into none other than Alberto. I did not expect him to be attached to me after one night, so coolly announced that it was not on between him and me. I was walking towards my room, relieved that I had cleared away at least part of my jungle, when I met up with Victorino,
just emerged to commence his Spanish social life. We both stopped, so happy to see one another.

I told Victorino about Alberto. To my surprise he did not seem keen to encourage this relationship. “No, not Alberto.” So, Alberto was someone to take notice of after all.

I knew I had a problem. I had been so quick to attach myself to Victorino and now I was finding it difficult to be more detached. The next morning my confusion caught up with me and I woke up really sick. I needed to cancel an outing with Catherine for a walk in a forest to the south of Paris and I ran again into Alberto on my way to the phone. He said he had been doing some thinking and would like an opportunity to talk things over with me. But our talk would have to wait, I was not feeling well at all.

Now began several days in bed with flu when more men came into my life than before or since. A friend of a friend in Lyon turned up and was happy to stay and talk as I lay in bed. Later in the evening Victorino turned up and made me some tea. He seemed to be at his intense best after midnight and his company was too precious for me to suggest he leave me to sleep. He settled in and began his lecture. I drank it all in wide-eyed and full of admiration for his greater wisdom.

“Now, Alessandra, we must get the infrastructure right.” (He pronounced ‘infrastructure’ with rolling Spanish r’s and I almost laughed.) It appeared that MEN were not part of the infrastructure. I had got it all wrong. First, said Victorino, as his watch ticked on to 1 a.m., was enough sleep. Second, was enough to eat. And third was work. Relationships only came fourth. As a mathematician, Victorino was into structures and numerical ordering and I was impressed by his mathematical view of life. And disappointed too. For me, Victorino came first. Eating and sleeping were slotted in around him.

The next day more visitors came. After 10 p.m. Victorino strode in followed by his brother Jesus and blue-eyed dreamer, Miguel-
Angel, also known as ‘Il Canario’. Miguel-Angel (unlike Victorino) was very even-tempered and this was attributed to his being born on an island. (It was well-known, said the Spanish students, that islands produced even temperatures and stable climates.) “So, how’s the little one?” Victorino asked authoritatively. He took charge of me. He phoned the doctor for me, and the high school to say I would not be in. He made regular house calls and wound up the days with a social call accompanied by Jesus, Miguel-Angel, and any other Miguel who might be around.

A friend of Catherine’s, Bénédictus, dropped around. He was tall, dark, handsome, French, and ‘aimable’. Victorino was sure Bénédictus was my man, and disappeared quickly. Bénédictus’ visit was followed by Alberto’s. I had forgotten about Alberto, or thought I had. Alberto looked dejected and sat down by my bed in his army disposal raincoat so that we could have our ‘talk’. We were just getting going when an English student, Richard, turned up. Alberto, perturbed, left abruptly. “There goes a jealous man,” said Richard helping himself to some coffee. Richard’s visit was followed by Victorino’s late night call, again in the company of Jesus and Miguel-Angel.

The next day I was well enough to wash my hair and to go to the bank. Throughout my three years in Paris, these two ‘events’ marked my attempts to take control of the unsettling river of life which passed through me. Alberto made one final, listless attempt to talk before wisely or unwisely giving up on me. Months later I was to look at him with envy. I had missed out again.

I was in bed again when Ezzedine turned up! Ezzedine had last seen me shining in Strasbourg. “What’s wrong, Alex, you have become so silent. You are not at all well.” He was right. I had changed - for the worse. My heart sank. ‘Hell,’ I thought, ‘was to be a young woman surrounded by young men and unable to get close to any one of them.’
Miserable, I paid a late night call to my beloved Victorino and sat silently enjoying the pleasure of his sole company. “You and men, there’s some problem, isn’t there?” It appeared there was.

So, it was back to the drawing board. First I must link up with fellow student, Mireille, who clearly had more sense than I did. From her I borrowed (and failed to read) essential reading matter for the course on ‘Style’, Contre Sainte Beuve. ‘Sainte Beuve’ sounded to me like some kind of cheese, or wine, or possibly even a liqueur made by monks. Someone was against (‘contre’) this Sainte Beuve. That someone was me.

I went, again with sane Mireille, to a screening of Visconti’s The Damned at the House of Brazil. Films were screened randomly at different houses throughout the Cité. If you liked, you could read some highly significant connection into the choice of film and the house. I found the film terribly depressing and inferno-like. Mireille and I chatted about it politely as we made our way back to the collège Franco-britannique, about its artistic merits, how ‘interesting’ it was, the acting, the overall ‘quality’ of the film. But this descent into hell had worried me and I knocked on Victorino’s door for another dose of his warmth - and, unspoken but experienced, his love.

Since, however, Victorino’s love for me was destined only to be expressed through a succession of duralex glasses of black coffee, I made a brief detour before bed to the college cafeteria where the Saturday night ‘boum’ (no explanation required here) was at its height. It was here amidst a throng of Arab students, that I met or failed to meet ‘Paul’. He came up and introduced himself and told me that he was Australian. “Australian?” That magical south land sprang up like a haven. Arabs and Spaniards receded as I shyly admitted to myself that the gentleness of this Australian was exactly what I needed. Paul told me that he lived at the college too. So I will see him again, I thought, and shyly fled.

I was finally well enough to keep my appointment with the
hospital. The doctor held up the chest x-rays and said they had been worried about the shadow over my lungs. He took more x-rays but concluded there was nothing to worry about. I was more concerned about the shadow which seemed to be appearing over my life and rushed back to the Cité to have coffee with Victorino and Jesus.

The Spanish connection remained alive and strong, but my health seemed to have deteriorated which did not help me to keep pace with Victorino. He was my ‘spiritual’ friend and, since celibacy made him uncomfortable, he constantly urged me to find a man to go to bed with.

Helen came to stay with me at about this time. She arrived quite late from Switzerland with a box of chocolates as a gift. We were sitting in my room when there was a knock at the door. Tall, ironic, ‘Mad Miguel’, a contemporary Don Quixote, wanted us to join the gathering in Victorino’s room. Like me, Helen felt instantly at home among the Spanish students. Another 'Miguel' was also present, a friend of Miguel-Angel, Il Canario. He was a student from Barcelona, visiting friends in Paris over the Christmas vacation.

Eventually Helen and I got up to go but were followed by the Spanish contingent. It was 10p.m., partying was due to begin. Tall, dark and very handsome Miguel from Barcelona had with him a tape of the Catalan singer, Lluis Llach, so popular at the time. The songs filled my room. Victorino held a glass of rum in one hand and put his free arm around me so that in fairy tale fashion I was his princess until the Spanish curfew. I was ecstatic which must have suited me because Miguel from Barcelona, ‘Finito’ as he was called to distinguish him from Mad Miguel from Madrid, coolly lit up his Ducados, sat in my armchair, picked up my scarf and tied it around his head. He had selected me and could afford to wait. No-one said ‘no’ to Finito. Meanwhile Mad Miguel began to make love to la belle Hélène, as the Spanish students decided to call her. While Alvaro sat quietly on the floor, cross-legged, and pretended to be a snake-
charmer. His snake, writhing dutifully on the floor, was Miguel-Angel.

Finito looked just like a pirate with my scarf around his head. I could even imagine gold hooped earrings. The glow of the night, the Catalan songs, and the fact that he was a stranger, all helped to romanticize him. Miguel-Angel approached me, “Finito would like to stay.” And Finito was right. I could not say ‘no’. I liked the look of him far too much.

As soon as we were alone, Finito took off my scarf and began to unbutton his shirt in a very matter-of-fact and experienced kind of way. “I like the look of you,” he said. It went without saying that I liked the look of him. Finito assumed that. A night with Finito was like a night with ‘Fernando’, as in the song. Finito was fulfilling a centuries old role as the dark handsome stranger.

However, ‘Finito’ had earned his name for a reason. The next morning he left as coolly as he had come. And I, a lot less coolly, but equally dazed, set off for my seminar at the ‘Faculté’ followed by coffee with sane Mireille and stable Zeinab. Helen’s company that evening cushioned me from thinking too much about Finito's failure to reappear.

The only remedy I had at hand to hide my disappointment was work. Still high from the night with Finito, I achieved an astounding amount of ‘research’. I hardly moved from my desk. After all this work, I felt I had earned myself the right to call on Miguel-Angel and to shyly ask if Finito had called in. It didn’t seem very likely, said Miguel-Angel. I returned to my cell and stared out my window onto the wintry evening light. I had no luck with men. This seemed to be my fate.

Late that night there was a knock at my door. Spaniards, of course, to begin the night. It was Finito and his escort, Miguel-Angel. They came in for tea until Miguel-Angel took his usual courteous leave. Finito explained he was leaving for Barcelona the next
morning. “I don't love you, you know, but I find you attractive.” I was amazed that he bothered with such fine and subtle distinctions. But I kept my feelings to myself, I understood him too well. Instead, “What’s your star sign, Finito?” He did condescend to call me ‘Kangourou’.

Detached and indifferent he left the next morning, leaving behind him me. I wished him ‘Buon Viaje’, Catalan for Bon Voyage. I was not at all surprised by his behaviour. It was in character. And for me, saying ‘yes’ to Finito had felt more right than just about any decision I had made for a long time.
1977 began. I was not well. I spent confused, sleepless nights trying to pin Victorino and Finito on my ‘man map’ and becoming distressed as they unobligingly and repeatedly slid off leaving the map blank again. I interpreted this as a reflection on my lack of attractiveness and I became quite depressed. Alvaro tried to come to my rescue with long talks about the general unsatisfactoriness of life and how, as the French writer Stendhal had pointed out, “Few are happy”. This only made things worse because Victorino seemed a lot less distressed than me by what had happened. Pale, unwell, overweight and nervous, I began to accomplish most things on willpower.

I felt very alone. One Saturday, ashamed of all the weight I had suddenly put on and of my unhappy attachment to Victorino, I decided to set off for the Quartier Latin walking all the way. I had almost forgotten that Paris existed. I had been living unsuccessfully in Spain. Finally, in boulevard St Michel, I bought myself folders, paper and exercise books to set myself up for a serious year’s concentration camp of work. I then had lunch at the nearby university cafeteria where I got talking with three nice black African students. There were a lot of black African students in Paris, but by far the largest foreign population at the time was Arab. Then, true to my word, I sat down to several hours’ work in the university library.

On the bus coming back to the Cité U, I met Victorino. I sat down next to him as though any separation between us was accidental. “Amparo is coming to stay for a week.” I was silent. Victorino was silent too. I should be over that I thought as I stood up to get off the bus one stop early. But as I stepped onto the pavement, the tears flooded to my eyes and I felt infinitely sad. Victorino had inspired real love in me.

Again, though, accidental life took over, insisting it was my real life and that chance encounters with Victorino were mere details
on the map. Catherine and I had arranged to meet in the Quartier Latin that evening for dinner and to see a film. We spent some time in a bar popular with Americans in la rue Saint Jacques, before going on to see a hopelessly imbecilic Italian film, ‘Casanova, adolescent à Venise’. What a waste of fifteen francs, I thought. I dared not think of ‘Finito, jeune Casanova à Paris’. When I returned to my room at the Cité U, Victorino, Alvaro, and Mario, a Portuguese mathematician, joined me for tea.

One night as I was about to go to bed after a hard day’s slog at the university library, I panicked. Might I be pregnant? Could that be the reason for this sudden weight? I knew who to see. Irish-American Anne was, in her dignified way, writing poetry in her room. She listened to me with maternal compassion. She wanted to know something about my family. “My parents separated too,” she said, “and it really does knock your confidence. You probably feel under a lot of pressure to form a couple. Maybe, too, you are worried about family things generally.” In a few words, and without hurting my already bruised feelings, Anne swiftly got to the point. She had an inkling of how confused my ‘man map’ was but no idea of the acute sense of worthlessness I had brought with me to my life at the Cité U. As Alvaro could not restrain himself from remarking, I really did have problems.

But back to Anne. She said that the I.U.D. was a terrific form of contraception. Terrifyingly to me, it was known in French as ‘un stérilet’. I shuddered inwardly. “It was inspired by the device used by Arabs for their camels to prevent them getting pregnant while crossing the desert.” The image was perfect. I did not need an I.U.D. at all. I was already a camel crossing my own personal desert.

I remember attending a poetry reading of Anne’s which she held in her room. I was impressed by the fragility expressed in her poetry and by her confidence to reveal this fragility. She spoke of ‘learning to live with cracks.’ I was worried. Didn’t I have a few too many
cracks? Victorino, still preoccupied with me, said I must go out and look for my man. How could I tell him that I was not really interested in MEN at all? I just had the misfortune to feel attached to him.

The next day, it could have been any day really, as I was making a phone call from the Cité U, I ran into yet another friendly Tunisian student. I knew he was Tunisian (as opposed to Moroccan, Algerian, Lebanese or Syrian). One quickly became adept at these distinctions when a student in Paris. He looked remarkably un-Tunisian really. He was fair, almost golden. Later, when I told him I knew he was from Tunisia, he was surprised. “Most people pick me as Yugoslav or even German.” I could see why.

I was searching for someone indifferent. As far as my feelings were concerned, it was a sad decision. But such decisions must happen all the time. Possibly because I was not feeling so well, I had cut off from myself. The January snow made the park of the Cité U look beautiful with its bare trees and groundcover of dead leaves. I took myself off on long walks from the Cité into Paris, enjoying the cold air on my face and still hoping to lose some of my uncomfortable weight.

Often on Friday and Saturday nights at the various colleges there were ‘boums’. You would descend into the cellar amid the bright lights, rock n’ roll, cigarette smoke and people whom you had mostly never seen before and would never see again, and wait for an Arab student to ask you to dance. Victorino encouraged me in this with the words, “There are a lot of handsome young men waiting for you down in the bar”, and I, inexplicably, would descend like a lamb to the slaughter.

On one such evening, predictably, an Arab student did ask me to dance. He was from Syria. I had some exotic idea that some of the dignity and wisdom of his culture might flow over into me. He explained that he had a girlfriend but that in order to broaden his experience, he would like to sleep with me. I assumed that this
‘broadening’ in some way related to the weight I had put on. For a nightmarish moment, I became almost petrified that I would not be able to say ‘no’. I escaped to my room and felt depressed. It was not even clear to me that ‘no’ was the right answer.

I did run into my friendly Tunisian again and liked him less the second time. He seemed to like me more and arranged to come and see me the next evening. He had my room number now, and I, very depressed, gave up. My escapes from disturbing feelings of unreality were either working, or walking, or washing my hair. The next day I walked to the Quartier Latin to the colourful rue Saint André des Arts to meet up with an Australian friend who was briefly passing through Paris. We had arranged to see a play together at the théâtre de la Cartoucherie just outside Paris in the Bois de Vincennes. It was Grach's (whoever he was) surrealistic adaptation (now this does not sound too good) of Kleist’s (who is he?) ‘Penthesilée’ (what does that mean? I don’t want to know). After three hours we left. A fourth hour would have been unbearable and the seats were very hard. Something about Paris permitted all kinds of lunacy. This play was one. Lectures held by the ‘insane’ psychiatrist, Jacques Lacan, were another (Alvaro told me he found them ‘of interest’). My liaison with Tunisian Salim was to be yet another. Parisian lunacy had its own diabolical regulations which it made up as it went along.

Now, on the metro returning to the Cité U, I met someone from a very different world, an Irish law student who introduced himself saying that he, too, was living at the collège Franco-britannique. His name was Brice. He asked me to join him for a drink but instead I dutifully returned to my room and waited for Salim to turn up. By chance, Salim arrived just as there was a blackout at the Cité U. I had to light a candle. It was a very small candle in a very dark room. I got to know Salim in the dark.

Before long, there was a knock at the door. Spanish students of course. I was invited into Victorino’s room and I would like to have
gone but Salim wanted my total attention. I felt caught between possessive Salim in the dark and confusing Victorino with his brilliant halo. I was trapped. Another knock at the door. It was Edmund, the English mathematics student, come to enquire after the lovely Catherine Kobylansky. Then Mad Miguel turned up and seemed happy to stay. Salim insisted that I stop answering the door. According to him I was a fool to hesitate even for a moment in my dealings with these odd people. Well, I was a fool. I should have thrown Salim out then and there.

After Salim left, I could not sleep. He had made me feel very unhappy indeed.

In my free hours at Maurice Ravel High, I escaped to the café across the road where I smoked my Gauloises, drank my black coffee and wrote in my diary. How very Parisian. All that was missing was a beret. I was no Hemingway, strong, resilient and productive, recording memorable and happy moments of his youth. I was the very picture of dejection, recording moments I would rather have erased from my life.

Cafés in Paris were a wonderful transitory zone where you could feel as dejected or as at home as you were. Paris cafés left you alone. It was to another café that I went that evening with a friend from the Cité. One of the more unattractive cafes that were near the Cité U. A group of young Arabs were doing what they possibly felt obliged to do: letting us know that we did not pass unnoticed. They were ‘dragueurs’ in the nicest possible way. They held up a photo of a cat’s eyes which they had found in a newspaper. The caption read, “Tu as de très beaux yeux, tu sais.” (‘You have very beautiful eyes, you know.’) We all laughed a lot. What a shame that we could not just leave it at that. We would all have been happier.

Instead, I returned to the Cité U to have dinner with Salim. I had arrived somewhere I did not want to be: I now had ‘a man in my life’ and he was the last thing I wanted. Feeling miserable, I called in
on Alvaro later that evening. While I drank a lot of his Spanish brandy, Alvaro tried to help me by explaining that he saw ‘thought’ and ‘action’ as opposed. I was alarmed by this idea. He then went on to say that the intellectual was the most passive of beings. I could not have been more confused and I stumbled out of his room and into Victorino’s room. To see Victorino last thing at night that was the meaning of the word ‘happy’. I slept so well that night, before lurching on to my next disaster.

Andorra, however, was not a disaster. According to Miguel-Angel, Finito had given up his studies (what studies?) in Barcelona, and together with a friend was setting up a bar in Andorra. Where should I go to clarify myself? Andorrah, said Miguel Angel. He said he would phone through to Andorra to make arrangements for me to stay there with Finito and his friends. “Don't thank me yet,” he said, “wait and see if Finito is going to be a good boy or a bad boy.”

The night train for the French-Spanish border in the Pyrénées left at 8.15p.m. from the Gare d’Austerlitz. I walked up and down the platform to keep myself warm, breathing in the damp winter air.

When I woke up at 6.30 a.m. the stars were still perceptible, white and silver. There was snow on the ground. In the early morning light I leant out of the train window bathing in the magical, awe-inspiring view of the snow-covered Pyrénées. The mountains slid by, silent and mysterious. I felt inwardly ecstatic, reliving the exhilaration of crossing over into Spain over a year ago now.

I arrived at tourist-stricken Andorra at lunch-time. Everything was very shut and Paco’s leathergoods shop where Miguel Angel had told me to go was very shut indeed until 3 p.m. I had to fill in time in a cafe. When I returned to the now opened leathergoods shop, a young Spanish girl was there but Paco could not be located. Now I spent literally hours waiting getting to know the range of leather goods in the shop. At 7 p.m. Paco’s father, a Seor Garcia, turned up. I was really worried. We went out into the rain together
and I climbed into the back of his car. He did not want to know about me. We climbed the narrow winding streets of the mountain town and he let me off business-like and asking-no-questions at a doorstep. As soon as the door opened, he disappeared.

Finito looked puzzled, inwardly disconcerted that I was so hopeful as to turn up. “Kangourou!” he managed to say at last. “Finito!” I said.

We hardly spoke. Later in the night we went to a cafe where Finito thought the elusive ‘Paco’ might be. More endless hours waiting. There seemed little else to do in Andorra if you were not a skier except to wait.

Back at Finito’s flat, I unrolled the sleeping bag I had brought with me from Paris and crawled into it. Finally Finito thought we may as well spend the night together. Why else had I come?

The next day, Finito spoke to me just a little bit more. First he looked at my cheap baggy jeans and said crossly, “Why have you bought them three sizes too large?”

I tried to fathom his character and decided that he was almost characterless. He said quite plainly, speaking French with a Catalan accent, that when he made love to women he was mostly indifferent to the woman as an individual. And he himself, he told me, had a completely ‘unstructured’ view of his life. He allowed me a glimpse of his inner philosophy: “If there is something constant, we carry it within us.” Finito was strangely formless. We did share one joke during my humourless stay. We were talking about my train trip from Paris to Andorra through the south of France, known as ‘le Midi’. “In that case,” I said, “l’Espagne, c’est l’après-midi!” (‘Spain is the after-noon’). He fully appreciated this view of Spain tacked onto France as a kind of afterthought. My one joke could not however make up for my loose jeans, and Finito’s indifference to me began to work its cure. I now knew I was no longer in love with Finito. With him out of the way, I only had one obstruction in my life. Salim in
Paris. Hack my way through him and I would find myself back where I had started: in a desert with no men.

A friend of Finito’s, a friendly butcher called George, drove us to the bus-stop. Embarrassed by Finito’s blankness, he stopped off at his shop and prepared me a ham sandwich for the long journey. I told Finito I would be fine and not to wait around. George waved heartily as the bus pulled out, anxious that I take some warmth with me as the bus climbed up into the icy mountain pass of Puymorens through the heavy snow.

On the train returning to Paris I met two young French men, Gilles and Michel, and it was with them that I breakfasted at the Gare d’Austerlitz at 6.30 a.m. the next morning. A painter like Manet might have depicted this cafe in an attempt at ‘realism’. There were mirrors above the bare tables, wooden chairs, plastic ashtrays advertising Cinzano. The coffee in small thick white cups smelt irresistible after an almost sleepless night on a hard bunk. My eyes were wide and dazed, mirrors of the unsatisfactory nightlife of the previous few days. The croissants at this early hour came straight from the oven, but I stayed with the black coffee. There was some Impressionist image I would have liked to create but I failed.

A friend of Gilles, an older man, Jacques, was also with us. He had come to pick up Gilles, with his dog, ‘Parise’. We all exchanged addresses. Then Jacques took me aside and explained what wonderful lovers the French were. Had he picked up some Spanish vibe which irked him? Jacques and Gilles drove me back to the Cité U and Gilles said he would drop by during the week. I would make sure I was not in.

Back at the Cité U, Miguel Angel was keen to hear about my ‘reunion’ with Finito. As it turned out, Paco had spent a night in jail charged with the possession of drugs. My desires for Finito faded quickly away and the name ‘Andorra’ became for me a symbol of steep, icy and inhospitable slopes, empty cafes, and boredom.
I did not enjoy life as ‘we’ at all. Somewhere this dream I had had of being part of a couple was not working out for me. Strangely, Finito’s indifference had suited me very well: it gave me the space I needed. And the undefined, unofficial friendship with Victorino suited me too. But for the moment, I was locked into us. I kept telling myself that I needed to rediscover Salim. Rediscover? I described him to myself as ‘interesting’. In fact, I practically invented him. I was now quite physically drained so that I did not have the energy to take charge of my situation and to see my relationship with Salim for what it was: something I would have been better off without.

The French Embassy wrote from Canberra saying that they could renew my scholarship and I accepted the offer - I did not know what else to do. I lived for weeks in a fog of hair washing, hours in the university library, and cups of coffee with Salim and his mate, Ahmed, or far more preferably with Alvaro.

Ahmed was Salim’s ‘chaperone’. Possibly they were both quite nice in their way but I never had a chance to feel this since I was secretly too distressed that I had let myself get involved in the first place. Ahmed for me was like Salim’s dark shadow, always hanging around as an uncomfortable reminder that I had got it all wrong.

Salim showed me photos of himself and his brother on the beach in Tunisia. The generous, warm, golden beach made me think of Australia. Salim looked like a kind of golden boy, his younger brother more like one’s expectation of the Arab, with black hair and a moustache. Salim told me how his father had died when he was twenty and what a difficult time that had been for him. He had felt the family pressures fall on his shoulders too much and he had come to Paris on one of the thousands of scholarships that the French government was handing out patronisingly to Arab students from North Africa. In Paris he had met Brigitte, a French girl, and they lived together. But the relationship was in trouble. I sensed that Salim felt cut off from his roots and from the code of conduct of his Muslim
background. Paris for him was alien. No golden beaches, no fresh mint tea, no family, no status. ‘But Brigitte loves me. We would like to have children.’ Something weighed on Salim and I could see that he needed to talk. ‘Alexandra, I find it so easy to talk to you.’ I would listen and pass no comment, respecting his story, and regretting that our relationship could not be simply this: an unravelling of life’s burdens over cups of mint tea.

The winter was beginning to thaw. Some days were almost like spring. One late February morning I woke up to a perfect spring day. After my one lesson of the day at the high school, I managed to put in some hours of work at the university library before returning to the Cité U for lunch. And there I ran into Victorino, vivid and glowing, just back from a visit to Spain. I stopped still and my false, dull, unreal life fell away as I remembered who I really was and who I loved, before returning, fatalistic, to my ‘life’. Briefly, the perfect weather and Victorino’s love inspired me. Into this moment of inspiration, Salim turned up.

Late that night, there was a knock at my door. It was Victorino inviting me to join him and three Miguels to celebrate his return to Paris. It was a celebration for me too. When I got up to leave, Victorino said in his over-relaxed way, “No, stay, Alessandra, stay with me.” But I did not want to simply fill a space left by Amparo. And I still hoped I had a special place in his life. Besides, any choices seem to have been made even before I met him.

This spring certainly did not have the magic of my first spring in Paris. Then I had been full of dreams and I had walked the length and breadth of Paris on the strength of these dreams. Now, my dreams had become submerged and Paris had become a series of rather unattractive metro stops or cafe stops. Metro Censier for the seminar at the depressing New Sorbonne. Metro Nation for the also rather depressing Maurice Ravel high school. Metro Cité Universitaire which took me into a world of its own, completely separate from
Paris. Sometimes, after the seminar, I joined the French girl, Mireille, for mint tea at the tea rooms of the nearby mosque. This experience would take us into a timeless, tea-sipping zone. I knew that here was the sort of tranquillity I needed more of.

Then there was the circuit of university restaurants followed by coffee either at La Maison du Brésil (another Le Corbusier creation), where the coffee was especially good, or at the nearest unattractive cafe, Le Fleurus (yes, the ‘s’ is pronounced here), which was so contrary to all the images one has of French charm, cosiness, here’s-the-perfect-setting-for-our-brief-encounter. Otherwise, students went to each other’s rooms, or, in the evening, to the bar of the collège Franco-britannique. The best evenings were where I ended up with my beloved Victorino. No better way to end the evening, I thought. My happiest though often briefest moments were spent with him.

Sharing my bed with Salim on the nights when he insisted on staying was very disturbing. I did not love him at all. I was depressed and I found it harder and harder to concentrate on my work. But Salim was thoughtful, and he turned up at my room one day with a pile of blank exercise books. “Start writing now, in these.” I was touched. He also brought me some books, Electricity I and Electricity II, from his studies for Mechanical Engineering. Salim’s books helped me to understand better the title of Claude Simon’s novel, Conducting Bodies. I could not claim to actually understand what ‘fixed ions’ and ‘freely circulating molecules’ were, but I was cluey enough to link up the definition of ‘conduction’ with the title of my fated text. I came up with some delightful ideas with which to breathe life into this dull project.

I did begin to work harder, battling against depression and puzzling low energy. I began reading about the latest trends in literary criticism in Paris. Apparently, according to the colourful Roland Barthes (who was lecturing at the prestigious Collège de France at the time), anything was possible. I could reduce Claude Simon's
Conducting Bodies to a pulp with my choice of psychoanalytic interpretations, linguistic analyses, socio-linguistic analyses (here I felt out of my depth), sociological, and possibly even illogical readings of the novel.

However, Roland Barthes, delightful as he was, was wrong. My thesis supervisor, the rigorous Madame Moatti, soon put an end to my fantasies. In Paris, and at the New Sorbonne, there was only one way to go: Madame Moatti’s way. If she could have, I think Madame Moatti would have done a complete makeover on me. For a start, I needed glasses (‘blinders’). A little more subtlety too. Surely I knew deep down that all men, even radiant Victorino, eventually became just like Madame Moatti’s own husband: a monotonous background? I knew this all too well. I also knew Victorino was the exception.

Victorino’s hold over me meant that I allowed the relationship with Salim to drag on. He was convinced that if I stuck it out with Salim, I would come away with a more real view of ‘la vie à deux’. The opposite happened: I felt more and more unreal and sad. I wondered about my dream, my dream of being with a man. Victorino was more wonderful than any dream. The smallest doses of Victorino filled my whole life. Lunching with Salim in the cafeteria of the building where he had studied Electricity I and II, I was amazed at how he seemed to have taken me over, breakfast, lunch and dinner, and how few electrical sparks flew. Conversation quickly dwindled to “a va?”, “a va.” (“Is everything O. K.?” “Fine, thanks.”)

But relationships at the Cité U were mostly very fluid. We were all young and we were all foreign to each other as well as to ourselves. Students ran across each other all the time, paused for coffee, and moved on. The Cité U was like a vast and unromantic barn dance: lots of partners, rough edges, and a haze of confusion.

Things got out of hand. I became attached to Salim as one might become attached to a bustop simply by having to wait there every
day. When he suggested that we might wish to live together, I felt
cornered. Too intoxicated by Victorino to say ‘yes’, too depressed
by Salim to say ‘no’. Fortunately fate was kinder in this case.
Suddenly the call of French literary criticism became quite powerful.

Really, I was very lonely - not from lack of company, but from
a lack of love. Except when I was with Victorino. It was a time of
struggle, a tough and unrewarding time, and yet I never gave up. It
never occurred to me to. I survived on willpower and not much else.

The answer to ‘my problem with men’ seemed to me to have
only one solution: to give up. So, one beautiful spring morning, as
Salim and I went for a walk in the Haussmann designed Parc
Montsouris next to the Cité U (where I often went for strolls along
the gravel paths in an attempt to sort myself out), I tried to explain to
Salim that I felt we were better off as friends. The formal setting of
the park seemed to confirm this for me. There was the lake with its
ducks, little bridge over troubled water and waterfall, the shrubbery
and the ‘forbidden lawns’ which are a feature of Paris. There was
also the odd ornamental statue. The message overall was ‘walk
through’, ‘walk past’ but ‘Keep Out’. It was a mundane moment as
I spoke with Salim, but I slept a lot better that night for it.

The Parc Montsouris was a link between the Cité U and Paris
itself. It was time for me to renew this link. Now, hopefully, I could
feel freer to enjoy the spring. Some March days were beautiful and
balmy. I found I woke up earlier, no longer weighed down by my
depressing ‘marriage’ to Salim. One morning, after working at the
university library, I walked towards the Jardin de Luxembourg and
then towards the Seine to view the Ile de la Cité in all its spring
splendour. Things took on a sharper focus, I felt more real. And in
the foreground of this focus were Victorino and Alvaro. They were
‘the men of my life’ and their friendship was as precious to me as
anything.

Alvaro was very keen on the idea of psychosomatic illness and
I drank in all his ideas over university restaurant meals and coffees like an inexhaustible sponge. All disease had as its cause some psychic disorder. I found the idea so interesting that I decided that it must be true. In fact, everything Alvaro said was surely correct though he often sounded angry with me which worried me. Was he simply being Spanish? One lunchtime, as we sat among the noisy trays, glasses, knives and forks, voices and the sea of Arab faces, Alvaro told me about his ‘interior’ revolution when he had been about my age. Of course I knew that he thought that I was desperately in need of such a revolution myself and my heart sank that he was so displeased with me. But I kept these thoughts to myself. Alvaro had found himself dead to life’s possibilities and realized that he was living life as a tourist and not ‘dangerously’. ‘La vie à touriste et non pas la vie à toute risque’ he said with his Aragonese accent, and I loved the play on words. “And life has become better for you since then?” I asked hopefully. Yes, it had, and I could see that Alvaro was in every way impressive. However, he seemed to me to be leading a far safer life than I was, but I could see that he was flourishing on that life. He seemed to enjoy his work and spent vast amounts of each day at his desk. I often found him there when I shyly knocked at his door, desperate for some really intelligent contact (often after being numbed by Salim). It seemed to me (as a fascinated observer) that in fact he lived life now as a metronome (a relaxed metronome) and I envied him this because it seemed to be the secret of his success. He always looked so fit and well when many other students looked pale and malnourished and cut off from their roots. He religiously jogged around the vast park of the Cité U every evening and then joined Victorino and the Spanish troupe for dinner and coffee and Spanish brandy. He and I always had a tremendous amount to say to each other but I was always struck by his startling silence when in a group. He would become completely silent as though, doctor-like, he was taking our psychic pulse.
Alvaro’s friendship with Victorino was one of the most striking relationships I witnessed in my time at the Cité U. They admired each other immensely and they complemented each other so well. Alvaro, tall, dark, reserved and silent; Victorino, slight, red-headed, communicative, and very out-going. Victorino enjoyed listening to me and Alvaro disagreeing on just about everything. He had decided that we were made for each other. “Alvaro’s your man,” said Victorino as I explained to Alvaro that telepathy did exist and that astrology must have a scientific basis. Alvaro, as a psychiatrist, knew all about Freud and neuroses, and I was secretly absolutely terrified of his knowledge.

There was another striking relationship: me and Victorino, but this one I was unable to observe. Alvaro regularly made trips back to the north of Spain on his motorbike and I wondered why he chose such a risky way of travelling. Was this what he meant by living life dangerously?

Alvaro explained to me that few people actually felt fulfilled in life and that that was why a lot of people wrote books. I would sit in the university library surrounded by books, suddenly uncomfortably aware that each book was the sad, sum total of an individual’s unhappiness. No wonder libraries were such solemn places. Almost like shrines.

Alvaro minus Freud was everything you could want of a friend. On one trip back from Spain, he brought me a bottle of wine from his village. On another trip it was a cassette of songs by the Catalan singer, Lluis Llach. “Now that,” said Victorino, “is a measure of how much Alvaro likes you.”

But where was the measure of how much Victorino liked me?

Sometimes I would stay chez Kobylansky for the week-end and have a taste again of ‘la vie Parisienne’. I would enjoy having a bath in their tiny bathroom - there were only showers at the Cité U. And we would all enjoy Sunday morning together looking out onto the
balcony and the elegant grey apartments opposite. When I say ‘all’, André was rarely present. He was not quite sure how it had all happened in the first place: getting married to this efficient Swiss wife and ending up with two picturesque but complicated daughters. His Russian melancholy would take over and he retreated to his ‘study’, an extra room on the landing, to brood over it all.

Then Catherine and I would descend the five flights of stairs to the open-air market to buy vegetables, salad ingredients and fruit for Sunday lunch. After lunch we sometimes went for a walk in the bois de Boulogne returning afterwards for tea and conversation at the friendly round table in the dining room. I allowed myself to take a break from my mystifying ‘problem with men’.

Sadly, my life took on a meaningless quality. Paris was at my feet, young people from all over the world were at my door, and I was just not well enough to seize the moments. I had no choice but to sit in libraries and to make my way through the ‘Russian Formalists’, linguists and literary critics who might help to bring to life my reading of Conducting Bodies. The fact that they were Russian gave me added incentive to adopt them as my own. There was Todorov, Vladimir Propp, and why not one day Pianoff? I thought.

I somehow ended up with no real personal base. I would have lunch with one student, dinner with another, coffee with another. One evening, an English student, Richard, bought tickets for a concert of baroque music to be held at the church of Saint Germain des Prés. As we sat in the floodlit church, and listened to the perfect acoustics, I wondered where I had taken a wrong turning. I am missing out, I thought helplessly, I am missing out on so much.

The next morning, I bought Le Figaro and glanced through the ‘Share Accommodation’ section. What I needed was a studio, preferably close to Saint Germain des Prés and here my true life would begin to flourish. But I put Le Figaro aside and, instead, caught a bus into the heart of Paris and walked across to the Louvre museum.
where I spent hours drinking in Greek (the Vénus de Milo was beginning to look slim beside me), Roman, Egyptian and Coptic exhibits, then on to a collection of German and Flemish fifteenth and sixteenth century miniatures before moving on to the Rembrandts which I loved, and a series of French eighteenth century portraits. I then caught a bus ‘home’.

The same evening, Julie, the English assistant at Maurice Ravel High, was having a ‘reunion’ at her attic room in the 19th arrondissement in the north of Paris. On the long metro trip from south to north, I made some headway with one of those French novels you have to read if you are really serious about literary criticism. I was not, but I needed to appear to be. So there it was, Les Liaisons Dangereuses, mapping out for me the dangerous territory of broken hearts and infidelity. I took comfort in the thought that my own life, incomprehensible as it was to me, was nonetheless free of this kind of suffering. I found Julie and friends lying around on mattresses drinking ‘vin ordinaire’. I was impressed by Julie’s relaxed approach to things but only stayed briefly, uninspired by this glimpse of life in a Paris attic.

Meanwhile, as my life ploughed through its toughest year of my time in Paris, the Iranian students were as persistent in their anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggle as I was with my own (personal) struggle. To celebrate the Iranian New Year, which fell on the 18th March that year, there was an ‘Iranian Solidarity Meeting’ which I attended because of the concert which was to follow. There was a lot of black hair, burning dark eyes, beards, and anger in the voices. The evening of song helped to dissipate the evil spirits. There were Iranian songs, Spanish songs sung by Paco Ibanez, a Chilean group called ‘Karaxu’, and some soft-peddling and rather depressing French singers, Jean-Claude Monet and Francisco Montaner. The highlight of the evening was a magnificent Algerian group headed by a singer with a mane of thick henna-d hair, Djamel Allam. I lost
myself in the the songs and along with the rest of the audience came away exhilarated.

The time was approaching when I was required to produce some real work for my thesis supervisor. She and I lived on different planets and would have benefitted from the services of an interpreter. I bravely arranged to see the terrifying Madame Moatti who, wisely, was extremely disappointed with my current work. The reference I needed, she announced, was Communications (to be pronounced with a French accent). Everyone who was anyone in Paris was reading it. Madame Moatti was amazed I did not know about it. I dutifully went out, bought it, read it, and became anyone.

It was a blessing to have to do this work at all, since my hours in the library were easily the least arduous hours of my daily life at the time. Having never been really ill before, it never occurred to me to see a doctor. Lost in a nightmarish world of my own, I imagined Alvaro’s words were true and that all sickness began in the mind. If I could just think straight, I would feel instantly better.

Looking back, I am painfully amazed that I did not realize how ill I was. I was a vulnerable target for Alvaro and Victorino’s ‘theorising’. I was cut off myself (like Salim) from my roots but to get back in touch with them could not be simple. Half the family, the Russian side, lived in France, the other in Australia, and together they formed a disharmonious whole which created painful dissonances in me. I feared, sadly, that I would have to make a choice as to which one was ‘home’, Europe or Australia, and I despaired because it felt unnecessarily lop-sided to have to deny one part of myself so that the other could live.

This dream of having a Russian soul at peace in an Australian body was at risk. The divorce was geographical. It was also inside me.

Baba, tuning haphazardly into my psychic wavelengths, said out of the blue, “Australia’s your home. It’s a land of vast spaces
like Russia.” And for a moment I could imagine Australia peopled
with warm-hearted Slavs, and myself in an embroidered red dress,
matching headdress and scarf, doing a Russian dance under the gum
trees. It took imagination but it worked.

I continued to go on long solitary walks through Paris, in an
attempt to lose all the weight I had so depressingly acquired. I
reminded myself of the existence of such sights as the Arc de
Triomphe and the Champs Elysées as well as the elegant rue du
Faubourg St Honoré where I felt like an outcast in my father’s shirt,
enormous jeans and depressing black coat. I wanted to disown myself,
to be swallowed up, and then, hopefully, to be reborn.

On the days when I did not have to teach, I often had long sleeps.
Then I would force myself to get up and to go shopping, or to do
some work in a library, or to go on a long, meaningless walk through
magnificent Paris. I often came back from these ‘expeditions’ and
just collapsed on my bed. But I was too ashamed of myself to admit
this. I had to be seen to be ‘coping’. It is a credit to inexperience and
will-power that I dragged myself on for so long in this state.

One beautiful spring morning, it was April, I woke up from a
wonderfully refreshing sleep, and felt (a rarity) reasonably normal.
It helped me to feel in control to sit down and to fix up my Social
Security papers for the year. A feeling of immense satisfaction arose
out of filling in, signing, and stapling together the relevant forms.
Little did I know how much I would be needing this student resource
in the year to come.

Salim was still around, so it was with him that I went to see
Anne Kobylansky featuring in a play in a tiny theatre on the Ile Saint
Louis. It was one of those unrelaxing plays where the actor appears
from behind you or pulls you onto the stage. I enjoyed most the walk
afterwards. The Ile Saint Louis was illuminated at night. I could not
believe that Salim had never even heard of this part of Paris.

There were a lot of days now when I not only felt tired all the
time but unsteady too. Assuming it was all psychosomatic - a word I had learnt in Paris and which I came to associate with life in Paris - and a reflection on my inability to cope, I forced myself up and out, imagining that ‘work’, like spoonfuls of bitter medicine, was the cure. Sometimes at the high school I would end up with only one student (or even none) for English conversation. By now I hardly felt human any more. Nonetheless, the articulate young French girl’s use of English prepositions went straight to my heart. She was at her wisest and clearest at sixteen. She explained to me the importance of tuning out into the world. The three key words in human relationships, she said, were ‘with’, ‘to’, and ‘from’. To myself I thought how I had over the past year been trying to be guided by these words, but that something was missing. I had been so busy tuning out into other people that I had overlooked tuning back into myself. That was the preposition we failed to attack, ‘back’. Possibly because ‘back’ was not a preposition. But I needed it to be one.

Longing for the English language, I one day broke my pact with French, and walked into an English bookshop, W. H. Smith, and bought the Oxford Book of English Poetry. What was happening to my Paris dream? I returned to the Cité U and called in on my beloved Victorino. He was still for me the most wonderful and only man in Paris and we still linked up with a flow that I have never found again. Later that day, Salim dropped in and we spoke together like friends. How right that felt. It was a hard-won liberation for me to see clearly in one day what place Victorino and Salim had in my heart. Exhausted but relieved, I lay on my bed and cried and cried - everything was in those tears.

Then I crawled into bed, still sad, but unburdened.

The next day, liberated by my tears, I was able to join up again with the flow of my Paris life. I listened with amazement as the English master at the high school told me about the prominent role he played in France in promoting a latest American invention in
language teaching, ‘Systemics’. So I was not the only one to live in a world of my own.

I clung onto the hope that, having now put Victorino and Salim firmly in their place behind me, I was on the edge of something new. While waiting for this new era, I valiantly ploughed on with my work. For company I had French radio. ‘France-Musique’ was, however, a tremendous disappointment. The French appeared to prefer to discuss music than to listen to it. There would be 'panels' who would fight with each other about pieces of music and I would sadly switch stations to ‘France-Inter’ where a more human voice tuned into my struggles. The late night programme of banal French ‘hits’ was my best companion. The announcer had a gentle, cluey voice, and an intimate way with words. His programme, ‘Marche ou rêve’ (Walk or dream), always ended with the words, ‘Demain ça ira mieux’ (Tomorrow will be better). How well this man understands me, I thought, as I fought with French literary criticism and stared at the postcards on my desk.

Into my fog, Brice, the Irish law student, reappeared with tickets to an opera at the Ancienne Comédie. It was Rameau’s 18th century opera, ‘Platée’. The music turned out to be a delight which is just as well, since it was impossible to understand what was happening or who ‘Platee’ was. In the intervals we admired the gaudy decor of the theatre. After the show we sat outside a popular cafe in the boulevard des Italiens and I happily listened to Brice who was more foreign to me than any Spaniard or Arab. He came from a world where people liked and respected their families, where one gardened enthusiastically, where one was straightforward, positive, and human. Brice was not worried to admit that he found his studies uninspiring. He did not have my unexplained need to dissemble. “I think,” he said, “that the ideal life is the life of the writer, where you just live and that living becomes your life’s work.” I was tremendously impressed with Brice but my world had become hazy and I was by
now so closed off from the people around me.

I felt caught spirit-wise. The Spanish connection was still strong. I often had the pleasure of coffee and long and interesting conversations with Alvaro. I often felt that in terms of aspirations we shared a lot. Once he asked me what I would really like to do (it was obvious I was not doing it).

“I’d like to work with you, Alvaro.”

There was always a Spanish gathering to drop in on or out of. It was Il Canario's birthday. The ‘Maria y Juan’ was passed around and I knew that I was just about to mess up another day.

Keeping separate from Victorino was not easy since I saw him almost every day. Sometimes, I would join Zeinab, the Egyptian girl who, like me, was attending the seminar on Style. She was to be found for some reason in the Netherlands House. I trekked right across the substantial park of the Cité U to see her, wondering about all the students I had never met, and perplexed at how haphazard all encounters seemed, but hoping they were not just that.

Zeinab and I talked about our work which she managed to make interesting, and she offered me coffee, sweets and cherries with Middle Eastern ease. I felt in such need of tranquillity, months of absolute tranquillity, and a kind of sanatorium-style existence. So much had been happening to me and I knew that I lacked the apparatus to cope with it all. I was manufacturing my ‘map’ as I went along which made everything doubly taxing.

I saw Salim almost every day too which was even more unsatisfactory. Quite often, Richard, the English student who was also a language assistant in Paris, would drop by. He succeeded in sounding knowledgeable about the French symbolist poets and he enlightened me on their -surprising- relevance to ‘today’s world’. I found this all very tranquilising, mostly because it was so removed from my own unpoetic life. I was reaching out, trying to catch the life which was already eluding me and which would soon no longer
be mine. I felt Victorino flash past me like a radiant vision, some kind of spirit life. He was separate from my day-to-day existence, but still more real and vivid.

Sometimes I gave in to my exhaustion and slept but it was not refreshing sleep. I felt heavy and weighed down, as though someone had put lead on my wings. I tried to get out of myself by getting out of Paris more often.

It was the end of April, beautiful late spring weather and already quite warm. An Australian friend, Anne, who was an English language assistante in a country high school near the Swiss border, invited me to stay. A chance to get away from my almost cruel life but I did not consciously see it this way.

The train left from the Gare de Lyon and in a mechanical kind of way, after buying my ticket, I went through the ritual of sitting in the art deco ‘Café de la gare’. It was like a movie setting but a far less depressing one than if the camera were to focus on me. I ordered ‘Un Schweppes, s’il vous plaît’, opened my copy of Elle and failed entirely to create a sense of style and excitement within myself. I found the train trip hard, stepped onto the platform at Dole exhausted, and hoped Anne would not be too disappointed in her Australian ‘friend’. I had in my handbag her friendly letter of welcome which I had read and reread, finding in it a sense of warmth and of home which I was missing in Paris.

For Anne the enriching life of ‘assistante’ (pronounce with a French accent) was as unsatisfactory in quiet Dole as I found it in Paris. We were neither of us having much fun. And yet I was surprised by how the familiarity of Anne's Australian voice and of her cousin Paul’s references to his life in Sydney (he had come to see Anne as part of a holiday), were so comforting.

There were clearly not enough men in Dole for Anne to get caught up in so-called relationships. Something different was happening for her. She had somehow brought the group of language
assistantes (Spanish, German, Austrian) at her high school together as a kind of family of which she was the quiet centre. I was so struck by this quality in her. She brought us all together. Of course, I dared not tell her what a mess I thought I was in. I saw it all as a source of shame. “Are you sure you’re okay, Alex?” were her friendly Australian words. “I'm fine.”

And, in fact, I did begin to feel fine during those few warm days in Dole. Anne organised Paul (who could play the guitar) and me, to join her in singing Australian folksongs for her students. They had learnt ‘Waltzing Matilda’ (of course) and then Paul gave his rendition of a swagman’s song, which must have been incomprehensible to the French high school students, as it was to me. “My tent poles are rotting” he sang, bent over his guitar, his hat, for effect, at an angle. I laughed so much. What a quaint country Australia must seem and what a strange culture. But through the song I could smell eucalypts and barbecue smoke.

The weather and the countryside were idyllic and the gentleness of Anne's company and of her cousin, Paul, won me over. Invisibly organised by Anne, we picnicked by the river, le Doubs, among the daisies, dandelions, and buttercups, and, as the Austrian assistante, Ingrid, threaded a daisy chain, she asked me about my exciting life in Paris. There was no ‘night life’ in Dole. Paris had the capacity to be one long night, dark or bright, if one had the stamina for it. My stamina at this point was simply going into surviving, and this included failing to communicate either to Anne or to Ingrid.

I got back to Paris feeling wonderful, warmed by a huge burst of Australian sun. As I came back to my room at the Cité U, I ran into another source of warmth, Victorino. He opened his arms out, exclaiming, “Ah! La belle Alessandra!” We sat together in his room and talked. It did not matter what about. Our rapport was perfect. At two in the morning I rose to go, so reluctantly. Victorino’s affection brought with it for me a lot of sadness.
The Paris fatigue was quick to return. I blamed myself. Why couldn’t I be more sedate like Zeinab and Mireille whom I met each week at my Style seminar? Why did the temperature rise so rapidly whenever I saw Victorino? My feelings for him were like a drug, but one which I was going without.

I groped my way out of Paris without even quite realising that that was what I wanted to do. I attempted a weekend bus trip to Cologne but only got as far as booking and then cancelling the ticket. I walked back from the student office with my refund towards the Cité U in the soft spring rain. I was feeling out of tune with the spirit of the season. Over a lifetime, to miss the joy of even one spring was a sad loss.

An Australian friend, in Paris for a short time, invited me to spend the day with her at Chantilly. I set off for the Gare du Nord to catch the train feeling sad and wintry and immobile. My thick, insensitive skin which was helping me to cope with the personal disappointment of having being linked - unavoidably it seemed - with Salim, meant that the walk through the woods with their masses of bright yellow daffodils to the castle of Chantilly was lost on me.

Other students had been prompted by the spring, too, to explore outside Paris. On the train trip back I happened to meet two English students from the collège Franco-britannique. So we spoke English. They were studying French literature too, but in a less distressing way than I was. Denis was working towards a PhD on the sixteenth century French poet, Ronsard. Chris was looking into the interconnections between the work of the French poet, Baudelaire, and nineteenth century French painting. When my face failed to light up at this information, they concluded that I was too passionately involved in my own field.

I had no set idea about my life as a student in Paris. It would be nice if there were a man, I knew that, but beyond this I kept an open mind. Still, the reality of thesis writing was for me at odds with my
Paris life. If I had been an art student, I would have felt more comfortable. I would have been delightfully happy and relieved - and surprised- if someone had suggested that I wear a short skirt and black stockings and carry a ‘portfolio’ under my arm when in the metro. My room should have been dotted with photos of Ile de la Cité in different lights as viewed beyond an artistically chosen branch of a tree, or of informal, spontaneous portraits of other students: Victorino laughing - he was always celebrating, English Richard sizing up his world like Hamlet, Alvaro looking still and meditative, like an El Greco painting, Catherine Kobylansky with her red beret, intent but detached. Someone might have seized the camera and taken a few shots of me: Alex whose time has not yet come.

If my time did ever come, I was being prepared for it in a most uncomfortable way. Some days I did capture the spirit of the thing and manage to wake up early, get to the nice, historic university library in the Quartier Latin for a few hours of literary push-ups before rewarding myself with a walk towards the Luxembourg gardens with my head held higher because I had worked off some of the huge load of guilt I carried around with me. But these so-called light-hearted days were very rare.

There was another me who was not getting properly aired either. This was the long-tramps through-the-countryside person. I was too depressed and overweight to mobilise this part of me but I did try. Catherine was always willing to join me for outings. One Sunday we walked and walked and walked through one of the forests just out of Paris, then lay on the grass in the sun. Back in my room that evening, I was listening to the Spring Festival of Song which was being broadcast live from Bourges. My body had grounded me, and, as if to compensate, my spirit was running ahead of me, trying to find a way out.

Romantic Mike had returned to Oxford, and he wrote to me inviting me to come and stay for a week-end at the end of May. Paris
had become drudgery for me. The smell of coffee and Gauloises, the
musty smell of the metro, the drab Cité U, predictable Maurice Ravel
High, and the section of the Sorbonne which had come my way,
were all depressing me. The glitter of Paris, its links with history,
required a response from me which I no longer had the energy to
give. So, I packed a bag and booked a ticket for Victoria station in
London at the Gare du Nord, and sat lump-like in the train to Calais.
Paris had got me down and it showed.

The Channel crossing was a revelation after the long months in
inland Paris. The sea was so wide and free, the winds so strong and
full of salt. I stood out on deck. The weather was perfect. I would be
seeing England at its best. The sea came as a reminder, too, that my
inland experience was not all that life would have to offer me.

When I arrived in Oxford on a warm, sunlit afternoon, I was
curious to see what I might have missed by choosing Paris as my
home: punting down the Thames, afternoon teas replacing the
unending cups of black coffee which were the lifeblood of
relationships in Paris, and English subtlety in place of anonymous
but stylish Parisian coolness - or was it coldness?

I went, as arranged, to Jesus College and sat in a wisteria-covered
quadrangle to wait for Mike. I felt more vulnerable without my
foreign language and less inspired. The Paris dream was still there.
Oxford would have had its dreams too, but for me it was a dreary
place, another reminder that ‘learning’ weighed too heavily on me.
And, in the nakedness of the English language, I sensed that Mike's
fine companionship was too close up. I withdrew.

The countryside was a mass of flowers, and, as in Paris, I took
myself off on a long walk. I came back to Mike’s place with a bunch
of English wildflowers. Mike’s flatmate, a nuclear physicist no less,
was outside gardening in the best Anglo-Saxon tradition. As I walked
through the front gate of the plain little house, I spontaneously gave
him the bunch of flowers and he thanked me in his broad Scots
accent. But I felt exhausted, I did not want to get close to anyone. My system was overloaded with too many impressions and too many encounters.

I returned to Paris which was so familiar now, and its special atmosphere of self-assurance and inspiration still protected me from the harshness of my own unhappiness. No sooner was I back at the Cité U, than I ran into Portuguese mathematician, Mario, who was on his way to dinner with an Italian friend, Luciano. Mario and I had amazed ourselves and everyone else with our expert dance routines in my barn-like room when my Australian friends, Janette and Helen, had come to stay. Moments of magic. Six months on, the moments were different: more scattered and more mundane. After dinner, we went to le Fleurus for coffee and came across the inevitable Spaniards. Mario then invited me back to his room where he lent me some records of American singers. I was hoping to find a suitable song for some of the high school students to learn and enjoy and alighted on the rather lonely-sounding song, “You’ve got a friend”.

My aim now was to work. Or was it? I felt distracted and fragmented and the life of the Cité U did not help me to focus. As the university year drew to an end before the summer, people like Alvaro seemed to become more focussed, more intent and organised. He was going back to Spain for the summer to link up with home, and to soak up the sun and the countryside. I felt lost. I knocked on his door and found him immersed in his work, and preoccupied. Maybe I should enrol in some appropriate ‘conference’ for the summer and mingle with sharp-minded academics? I wrote off a letter enquiring about places in a conference to be held outside Paris on ‘Psychoanalysing Texts’. It was a great relief to receive a reply that the conference was ‘complet’. I had just missed out on a chance to wear a plastic badge with my name on it and to hold conversation (probably in English) with strangers.

A day trip to Chartres was organised one Sunday by the college.
People I did not know existed turned up for the bus trip: quiet, dignified, well-spoken English students who had enough presence of mind to bring along their cameras to record our visit to the famous cathedral. I discovered that dedicated pilgrims actually walked part of the way from Paris to Chartres each spring, and my flexible mind suggested to me that it would do me good to do this once a week. Not only good for the spirit but also an excellent way of losing a lot of weight. I remember buying a little illustrated book on the history of Chartres cathedral at a nearby historic souvenir shop. I chose the English version, unexpectedly moved by the sound of the English language on the bus trip. It was a kind of gesture to a future life when, hopefully, I would get things right. I also bought quite a large and cheerless black and white photo of Saint John the Baptist. He looked so tired and drooped. Had he spent too long in the desert?

I would never have admitted it, but I really was a long way from home. These English students only had to cross the Channel. I was beginning to feel the strain of my lonely life. Still, this did not prevent me from thinking, when Peter turned up unexpectedly in Paris from Sydney, that I had progressed beyond my Australian connections. Peter was also a graduate in French. He came out to the Cité U and we had a university restaurant dinner together. We came back to my room for coffee. There was a knock on the door. It was Mario, the Portuguese mathematician, come to borrow a plate for an Argentine fiesta. ‘Fiesta’, the word summed up very neatly the ongoing chaos of life at the Cité U.

Peter, I thought from my lofty, lonely height, had yet to experience the emotional and spiritual growth I had been through. Peter seemed excited at the thought of post-graduate research in a way I could never be. Then again, he probably did not approach the whole thing quite so humourlessly as I did. I admired him for what I saw as his Australian energy. And he seemed so mobile where I felt so weighed down, he was admiring open doors where I was staring
at closed ones. As he spoke, he kept repeating my name in a friendly Australian way. He was very keen on a current French philosopher called Jacques Derrida, and he pronounced ‘Derrida’ even more expertly than I could have. Derrida was one of the people who was ‘on’ in Paris at the time. I could see that Peter would cope with him a lot better than I was coping with Claude Simon. When Peter left, I wondered if the missing link in my work might well not be Derrida himself. The next time I was at the library, I tackled one of his publications. It would have been incomprehensible in English too. But Peter clearly had an ability to read between the lines which I did not.

I sighed, inwardly defeated. In fact, I missed nothing in passing over Derrida. Listening to Peter talk about Derrida (complete with gestures) was a far more delightful experience.

I still had two lives - if you could call it living. My Paris life and my Cité U life. They hardly overlapped at all. And yet, Paris without the Cité U would have been less interesting. Paris had an almost conceited confidence in her permanent appeal, while what was happening (or failing to happen) at the Cité U was unique and unrepeatable. It was a mostly unattractive and certainly very unromantic setting in which to come to grips with ‘relationships’.

Over time, couples emerged at the Cité U - but not quite as I had hoped for. Victorino and Amparo seemed to have been together forever and I envied them. Irish-American Anne was with a man of her choice. Alberto had recovered from his night with me and now had an English girlfriend and a duck called ‘Livingstone’. It all looked so prosaic to me. Except Victorino. To be linked with him would be a source of endless joy. Amparo’s happy face when she came to stay, more and more frequently, expressed this. Alvaro and I could easily have been mistaken for a couple, a very reliable and permanent one. We were both tall and dark and dignified and supposedly scholarly. We were also friends.
Alvaro had a set of thoughts and feelings which he shared readily but I sensed, that like me, he kept his deepest feelings to himself. He was very hard to read and this enigmatic quality had me returning to him again and again, almost magnetically, as I tried, and failed, to piece him together. What I did not realize at the time was that I too had this enigmatic quality. I saw myself as open and communicative. So long as I kept my feelings to myself.

Alvaro's strong, silent presence was very powerful for me. I was profoundly impressed by him and yet most of what I picked up from him took place in silence and over a distance. There was no intimacy between us. Quite unconsciously I noted his movements in my mind. Was Alvaro in Spain or in Paris? Was he in his room or in Victorino’s room? Was Alvaro in or out? It was reassuring and significant to know where he was.

Peter, during his brief time in Paris, did not rent a room at the Cité U, but in his imaginative way found a ‘maid’s room’ on the eighth floor of a place near Bastille. I visited him there and admired the poster-style grey on grey view over Paris rooftops and landmarks. I felt so burdened by being very overweight and unwell and upset that Peter actually seemed to recognise me. My face had become very white and lifeless and my spirit began to look down on me from a distance, unsure of what to do.

My body was unhappily but dutifully present at the correct number of seminars, English lessons, and hours in the library. There was also coffee with Alvaro at the Cité U, coffee with Catherine in artistic Left Bank settings, and the odd ‘descent’ into the terrifying bar of the collège Franco-britannique, where people presumably went to be seen. I was very upset that people still recognised me and that I still had the same name. Other people saw continuity where I found none. Last year’s Alex and this year’s Alex were not the same person. When I went to the cafeteria for breakfast, which was an ordeal too but the only way I knew how to get myself out of my room in the
morning, the man who served the coffee said nothing but I could see by his expression that something was very wrong with me. I was living in a daze.

As the spring turned into early summer and students began to sit out on the lawns of the park of the Cité U among the daisies and the now leafy trees, I became more aware of how a barrier had arisen between me and life’s pleasures. On one of my visits to rue Lecourbe, exhausted, I asked Baba if I could stay with her over the summer. “Come,” she said and I felt relieved. Some things were simple. Later she added, “So, you’ve seen what life is.”

One afternoon I joined Alvaro and Victorino for coffee in Victorino’s room. Outside, Victorino’s young tree (it was my tree, as I saw it, outside his window) looked wonderfully happy in her new green leaves. That tree is the real me, I thought, as I sat depressed and unusually tired with my two greatest friends. Victorino had a bowl of summer fruit from the local market and he offered me some saying, “For my little one,” adding, as he looked at Alvaro, “our little one.” Victorino sat there in his red and brown check shirt with the sleeves rolled up, looking so alive and resilient and ready for his Spanish summer. I could not make sense of how close I felt to him when we were moving off in such different directions.

I packed up my things and over several metro trips took them back to Baba’s flat. I knew I would be returning to the Cité U for the new university year in September but this packing up nonetheless felt very final, as though my return would be to something quite different. I was right. And knowing this, I knocked on Victorino’s door to say good-bye, not to him, but to ‘us’. I sat down in silence. I ended up crying, I felt so so sad because I loved him. “What a fool you are,” said Victorino, “to cry over me.”

There was a knock on the door. It was Alvaro, just back from a quick trip to Spain (on his gleaming, ‘dangerous’ motorbike), and looking absolutely exhausted. Like me, he was reporting back to
base. Alvaro had come to say ‘hello’, I had come to say ‘good-bye’. We would all meet again, but it would never be the same.

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I slipped back into a routine with Baba very easily. One evening when I got back to the flat, Dimitri, a friend of Baba’s who worked at the Russian conservatoire, was there. He had a new polaroid camera and was keen to use it. The photos he took of me and Baba standing side by side in the dining room were real souvenirs of a wonderful grandmother-granddaughter rapport. We both looked so happy. Baba, alert, humorous and far too intelligent. Me, fat, Russian-looking, and - for an instant - content.

That night, I took Baba’s copy of Le Monde to bed with me. It was back to grappling with this very demanding newspaper but this time with no MEN in mind. The ‘men of Paris’ had been a personal disaster for me but I hid my sadness and disappointment in the unreadable pages of Le Monde.

Now that I was back in Paris proper, I was inspired to walk again more regularly. Baba did not comment on my weight problem (if only someone had). I would walk the full half hour to the university library. Here I read an article on ‘Structuralism and psychoanalysis’. What next? In Paris, anything was supposed to be possible. In reality, I had found that life set its own very severe limitations on what was possible.

When I returned from the library, Dimitri was there again listening to Baba telling him the life story of her beloved Theodore. ‘Theodora’ as she called him. I had heard it all before and was intolerant: how Theodore became ill because of his love for two women. This was an interesting cause for leukemia, I thought. Had Alvaro heard of this one?

Now, too, I was once again within walking distance of the Kobylansky, and began to drop in on them more often. Catherine
had a summer job at the post office at Opéra. She was enjoying it. She knew all about how to give instructions for dialling international with a suitably authoritative voice. Unfortunately, the staff at the post office did not seem to think her red or purple stockings were suitable for the job.

Unexpectedly one afternoon Brice called in to say good-bye. He was leaving for Ireland the next day. I was touched by his visit and sad that I never saw him again though he wrote to me inviting me to join him and some friends on a trip through Languedoc later that summer. The opportunities were there. It was I who was missing. My life had become more and more like a bad dream. I felt like one of the desolate gargoyles that stare out over Paris from the towers of Notre Dame.

One morning I woke up early to a very warm Paris day, and, as I came out of my room in my long cotton nightdress, Baba greeted me in a wonderful way. She was always a morning person. “How pale you are, Sonia. But you are still beautiful. You are always beautiful because of your soul, and I love you.” And I felt wonderful after that!

Moving back to rue Lecourbe to stay with Baba gave me some relief, but the change failed to lift me out of my depression. I dreamt of fresh air and open country. Paris seemed so stale.

The final unsatisfactory escape from Paris that spring was with Catherine to the Normandy seaside resort of Deauville on the English Channel. This, I hoped, would be the refreshing break I needed before plunging back into my work. Catherine and I spent two days there, mostly walking. We had very little to say to each other at this stage. We ended up on a promontory, high up, with a wide Monet-like view over the sea, both of us in completely separate worlds, irrelevant to each other.

It was after the time away in Deauville that I decided that I had to get out of Paris for the whole summer, leave it all behind me and
try to find something which was not in Paris for me: tranquillity. The sad fact was that Paris was failing to return to life for me even though I was once again living in her midst. I had nothing to offer Paris: no buoyancy, no dreams. I had aged.

I bought some records of French singers whose names were current at the time: François Béranger and Maxime le Forestier. The names alone were quite romantic and Medieval-sounding, and I went round in the evenings to play the songs on the Kobylansky's record player while Catherine and Anne listened with me and decided if the songs ‘worked’ or not. We sat in their bedroom which doubled as Catherine's studio with its easel, huge gilded mirror and French doors. Catherine was working on abstractions at the time and I preferred her work to anything I saw at the newly opened modern art museum, centre Pompidou. Catherine herself seemed permanently abstracted to me, like someone who lived on opium.

Anne was waiting for her future. Her life as an actor involved a lot of waiting. She filled in the time talking to fellow actors either in a cafe or from home on the phone. With her commanding, maternal voice, she sorted people out, put them back on track, made sensible Swiss suggestions, in between lighting up her cigarettes.

But I had lost any sense of having a future. I was mourning a present which was failing to happen.

Catherine and Anne switched off the lights, lit some candles, and Anne now put on her favourite record of the moment: Véronique Sanson. Véronique was not a poetic singer unlike the men whose records I had bought. She had a resolute voice. I had heard the theme song too often at this stage: ‘J’attendrai’, ‘I will wait for you’, a recycled wartime song. So this waiting was not new.

There were a few deadlines to meet, and an exam. I dealt with it all indifferently. Everything felt irrelevant except thinking about Victorino and getting things photocopied for Alvaro at the high school before the summer holidays. I proudly delivered neat piles of stuff
chez Alvaro, glad to be of service, and in this very small way fulfilling
my true role in life: to live for a man.

I made the most of the picturesque route from rue Lecourbe to
the university library in the Quartier Latin, walking most of the way.
I preferred to sit in aesthetically pleasing libraries, alive with history
and tradition, but with deadlines forcing me to be more practical, I
had to visit the library of the ‘New Sorbonne’ more often. I have no
memory of this place. It is a blank, something so bleak, I had to blot
it out. Cafeterias were in the same building. There was the ‘couscous
floor’ popular with Arab and African students, and the non-couscous
floor. This was Paris at its least romantic. The study of linguistics
and ‘structuralism’ is linked for me with buildings like this: square,
austere, used but not loved or respected.

A few times I met Mireille and we worked together. She -
fortunately for her - lacked my ability to go to extremes, so library
work was backed up by social cups of herb tea and slices of chocolate
cake. Mireille was studying for her final year to qualify as a high
school English teacher. She made English sound very foreign to me
and I was intrigued. I liked to think that my spoken French was more
authentic.

Authentic was a word the French liked. Mostly it applied to
things the French were proud to own and acknowledge. I would
have applied it to the library of the New Sorbonne (metro stop
Censier), and its cafeterias. An authentic student experience. Also,
to catching the bus from the Cité U on a winter morning with students
in dark blue or black overcoats speaking to each other in their version
of French.

The cards I carried in my purse: my I. D. card, my student card,
library card, Cite U resident's card, public transport card, these were
all reminding me that I was one of many. I was not special at all and,
loaded up with folders and books, and anonymity, I did not walk or
float, I trudged. The smoking (Gauloises, Gitanes, Ducados) stopped
but the coffee continued. Paris without coffee was not ‘authentique.’

I was a long way from the image one might have had of oneself sitting elegantly in the Café de la Paix, place de l’Opéra, speaking in a temporarily attached way to some ‘attaché’ but I cannot say I missed this. The student life was unsatisfactory but it was very absorbing too. It was a life that tested one’s survival skills. Nothing was working out for me. And yet, I was so identified with my Paris life that I accepted its burdens unquestioningly. I knew my way around. I was a fully integrated, dejected student. Still, I was not a comfortable student. Possibly there is no such thing.

Catherine decided officially that ‘Arts’ was not for her. Art was more her thing. One always liked whatever she painted but she did not seem to do much of that either. She hung around listless, maybe dejected too, and Marcelle asked me in desperation, “Where did I go wrong, Sonia?”

In the evenings I sat at the table under the window in my room in Baba’s flat and looked over the roof of the flats opposite where I saw lights come on (when the shutters were not closed), sometimes chandeliers. At this table, I wrote my letters, read my references, and listened to Alvaro’s Lluis Llach tape and tried not to look ahead too much. There seemed to be nothing to look forward to. I was using French almost all the time now and without my realising it, this possibly made me feel more lonely. Parisian French was best sampled when speaking with Catherine and Anne. But my affinity with them was not Parisian but Russian. Catherine’s Chagall-like flights of imagination and Anne’s expansive monologues which made me laugh so much were very familiar. The speeches in Chekhov’s plays where the actor seems to address something invisible but deeply felt like ‘life’ or ‘destiny’ or ‘suffering’, reminded me of how Baba spoke to me. “There is so much suffering in this life.” Also reminded me of how Anne who, under the guise of joking, let us know that she did not expect much to come her way. Or André who kept saying to
me, “But this is life, Sonia,” as though I was hovering between heaven and earth, still not quite born.

Catherine, like me, was less of a performer and more of an observer. Like me, she worked at reading people’s ‘graphs’. My graph was definitely on a very downward slope but Catherine said nothing.

I did not have Baba’s flow, I was mute with defeat. Chekhov would have been obliged to place me in the wings. I was sunk in something overburdened which found its only outlet in work.

But things had been worse. Time spent with moody Salim. I remembered going out with him one evening to one of the cheapest, sleazy Arab restaurants in the Quartier Latin. As we ate our couscous, we talked to an Austrian girl who was sitting close by. She was on holiday in Paris. She asked us about ourselves, accepting us, to my distress, as a couple. “We are students.” “Students!” she said fervently, “How I love students!” An image of Victorino came into my mind and I felt depressed. He was probably more along the lines of what the dreamy Austrian girl was thinking about.

I had now spent two years in Paris. I was possibly more knowledgeable about many things: things other people might have envied, but this knowledge meant little to me. I did not feel attached to anything much. I did not feel inspired to adopt France as a home. I had seen too many historic sites and charming villages. I had no sense of a link with any of it.

I did feel at home in Paris, but in a detached way. However, even if I was at one remove from the life I was leading, I was still trying to fulfill some kind of practical plan. Europe was a linguist's paradise and language learning for me was like gymnastics. I was adept, poised and centred, and enjoyed going through my linguistic paces.

As I had the summer before, I made enquiries about language summer schools in France. The university of Toulouse ran Russian courses in the Pyrénées near Lourdes. I’ll try my hand at that, I
thought. I pictured myself doing the equivalent of cartwheels in Russian and the thought was refreshing. I was beginning to feel cramped in the French language. The rules of French, the clever turns of phrase I had picked up, the skilful ways to begin a sentence, were all deeply foreign to me. French was my party trick. What I did not anticipate was how much I would be out of my depth with the Russian alphabet and with the complexity of that language. My Russian heritage seemed to belong to a part of me that was before words.

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I wanted the Paris dream to be taken out of my hands. Exhausted by my life, I wanted to hand myself over to the flow of a much larger river.

* * *
I could not believe I actually was going to a language summer school in the Pyrénées to learn Russian. Even at the best of times, the Pyrénées mountains are an unexpected place to learn Russian. But psychically drained and feeling very low, I washed my hair and packed like part of a bad dream.

And I spoke with Baba for a long time before leaving for the Gare d’Austerlitz. I did not want to leave her either.

I caught the midnight train. At dawn I glimpsed the beautiful old town of Pau, famous for its spectacular views of the Pyrénées, then Lourdes, and finally Tarbes, where I got off in the early morning light. It was so much cooler here than in Paris. Raining, in fact. I caught a bus to the town of Bagnères-de-Bigorre where a mini-bus from the summer school picked up a group of us and took us back to the ‘internat’. The ‘internat’ was a block of dormitories, the boarding section of the local high school. It was a completely unbeautiful concrete block but it was clean and comfortable.

We settled into our dormitories and then, feeling very low, I went for a short walk in the ‘Thermal Park’, hoping that this tiny, damp spa town with its thirty-eight (!) springs, would be like a balm to my whole being.

The mountains moved me now as they had when I had first crossed into Spain a year ago, and on the first afternoon, I joined some other students for a mountain walk - it was a very steep climb. We went up with some friendly guides, heading for a blue lake up in the mists where they said the wildflowers were especially beautiful, but I felt too weak and I had to stop. Being alone in these surroundings was something I needed. The students returning from this hike looked glowing and exhilarated and I envied them from my own low, grounded state.

Already by the second day Russian classes seemed less sinister.
We had as our teacher a lively, humorous, and compassionate, redheaded Rosa Kaminska. Over the weeks it became apparent that there was some kind of feud between Rosa and the two other Russian teachers - Irina the Ballerina and her bedazzled French husband, Gilles, often to be seen with their angelic-looking golden-curled little son, Seryoza. His name rang out across the school grounds. Thus I learnt to pronounce it perfectly.

The feud seemed to be about some mystifying educational differences which meant that there were always at least twenty metres between Rosa and her rivals. I was relieved to have fallen in with Rosa's group.

I who was normally such a natural with languages found I had difficulty concentrating on the Russian. In the first week the single most important sentence that was drilled into us was: “When is ‘Uncle Vanya’ on?”

Survival Russian.

In my dormitory I met a Canadian girl. Dale was at the summer school for the French classes. She looked as though she had already spent a month in the mountains. I could picture her in sensible hiking shorts, sturdy boots, a haversack, and drinking pure spring water at its source. She was very sun-tanned and had long straight brown hair and an intelligent, sympathetic face. I liked her immediately.

We began exploring Bagnères together (in the rain). It was a relief to speak English again and our talks were as long as our walks. Dale absorbed the details of my ‘life’ in much the same way as the mountains absorbed us.

All the walking and talking however, did nothing to remove the extra layer I had acquired around my body. I felt I had lost myself. “This just isn’t me,” I told Dale. I could also have been referring to my life at the Cité U in Paris.

One morning I went to the local market to buy an even larger pair of jeans. By now I had become mostly immune to the charms of
France and French life. More real for me were simple things, like shopping. The cold, wet climate of Bagnères meant that I had to buy a huge black mohair jacket knitted locally from mountain wool. I wrapped myself up in this, hid behind it, and turned up at the Russian classes complete with silver earrings to dream about a more glamorous life. “Sasha likes earrings”, Rosa would say conversationally in Russian. I loved the Russian word for earrings - ‘clipsi’ - which sounded so apt. Maybe it was the part of me that was Russian that loved to wear earrings and perfume even when everything felt wrong.

Then there was taking up the hems of the jeans (correspondingly longer as they got wider). This was a reassuring task. There was hair washing which had helped me through many tricky moments in Paris. And finally there was sitting down with the Russian and repeating to myself how bad the weather was at Bagnères or talking about what I loved (earrings, going for walks, nothing more threatening than that.)

There was an excursion to Lourdes. I was drawn to the story of Bernadette’s vision of healing. Healing waters, I felt in need of them but I felt I lacked a vision. As we sat by the river that flows through Lourdes, Dale and I got talking with a Russian who had come on the course, like Dale, to study French. He said that he could read hands and I, feeling that my life could only get better, gave him my hand. “You will have a vision too,” he said, “about healing.” Amazed, I could say nothing. That evening Dale and I went out to have a drink at an outdoor cafe at Bagnères. It was a beautiful night with a black sky and silver stars. A Van Gogh night.

Dale and I did some very long walks together. The long summer evenings were perfect for after dinner walks and one evening we walked the three kilometres from Bagnères to a Pyrenean village called Asté. It was typical (‘typique’ as the French love to say) of the area: the houses had grey stone walls and grey slate roofs which
glistened in the sun, especially after the frequent rain. A mountain stream ran through the village so that roses flourished in the little gardens which had as their backdrop the imposing, often brooding, Pyrénées. On another evening, Dale and I walked even further as far as one of the many ‘sources’ (springs) of the area, la Source des Crastes, as it was called. We returned to Bagnères quite dazed from all the walking.

Even with the fresh air and all the walking I still felt far from well. I felt unreal, so much so that I phoned the Kobylanskys in Paris. Anne was in. More practical than me, she suggested I see a doctor. A doctor? I had misgivings. The doctor took my blood pressure, listened to my heart, weighed me and despatched me with the words, “Elles sont grandes et belles, ces Australiennes!” I knew I was ‘grande’. I also knew I was anything but ‘belle’.

Coming out of the doctor’s surgery, and knowing that I was having trouble articulating what was wrong, I went into a bookshop and found a book, About men and plants (Des hommes et des plantes), a surprisingly accurate choice for my situation and yet I had chosen it almost blindfold. The book must have been on display because its author, Maurice Mességué, had been born in a little village north of Bagnères. His father had been well-known as a healer in a family of five hundred years of healers. The river Adour which I enjoyed crossing every day on my way to the Russian classes, also flowed through Mességué country.

Maurice Mességué would have been in his fifties when I read his account of how he became successful in popularizing ‘folk medicine’ in the south of France. Perhaps one can meet people through books, because his words set me dreaming about a simple, harmonious, healthy life, in touch with nature. My Paris life was complicated, disharmonious, unhealthy and alienating. I was groping my way towards ‘health’ like a sleepwalker. And it is a sign of how unwell I was that I saw health as a dream.
One Sunday I went to Pau with Dale. It was a glorious summer day on which to visit Henri de Navarre's castle and then to walk along the promenade des Pyrénées with its spectacular view of the snow-capped mountains. The French poet, Lamartine, had called this the most beautiful view of the earth in the world where Venice was the most beautiful view of the sea. Even after our sun-drenched outing to Pau, we set off in the evening for a twilight walk to the village of Asté.

The weather at Bagnères was improving and Rosa began to hold her classes out in the sun. In her gregarious way she also arranged an outing for us to a house in the mountains belonging to one of the students doing the Russian course. It was a stone cottage set in rich, emerald-green paddocks on the banks of the pretty river which rushed through Bagnères, the Adour. Honeysuckle grew up the stone walls and a single birch tree gave a Russian stamp to the setting. Against the backdrop of the grand Pyrénées, two beautiful horses, one black, one speckled grey, allowed us to come close and say hello.

We had afternoon tea outside and on a round wrought-iron table under a tree, with the tea being served from a samovar. Rosa then presented each of us with little badges from Russia. I treasured mine for a long time after. It had on it the word MOCKVA and a tiny engraving of a ballerina. I pinned it to my bulky, un-ballerina-like self.

And, to complete the idyllic afternoon, the young student whose house it was, played us some songs, Russian and French, on his guitar.

It was hard to return to the uninspiring town of Bagnères after this taste of the true beauty of the Pyrénées. But the French, being very methodical, had given Bagnères its place on the cultural map in a very top-heavy kind of way. There was the Bagnères song, ‘Hymn for Bagnères’ (it needed one), and even a dance, ‘La Bagnéraise’, specially choreographed, I assumed, to be danced in the rain. Then
there was the Bagnères postcard telling us that Bagnères was the fertile heart of the area known as ‘la Bigorre’, witness to invasions and bloody religious struggles, but now a place to restore yourself at its thermal springs, while admiring its shady parks (they meant gloomy). I satisfied myself with the thought that Bagnères, far from being a backwater, was a promising starting point.

On another Sunday I went with Dale and some other students to visit the larger and more elegant spa town of Luchon. Luchon was at a much higher altitude and the air smelt sweet and fresh in a way it never did in Paris. In Paris I was no longer breathing. We had lunch in Luchon’s elegant Thermal Park and then, while the other students explored the town, I went into a bookshop feeling extremely tired and bought myself a copy of Andre Maurois’ novel, The Nest of Vipers (André was referring to his family here) to read while sitting on a park bench. The book had been on display because some of the action took place precisely in Bagnères-de-Luchon.

Again the day was not complete without my twilight walk with Dale. This time we went even further to a village called Gerde. We stopped in a field where some farmers were just packing up after a
day’s work, before returning to Bagnères in the haze of a red sunset.

Towards the end of the summer course I felt my Paris studies weigh down on me again. Each morning we all had to cross the Adour on our way to the language classes. This river was one of the highlights of my time in Bagnères. Most of the Russian I have forgotten, most of the people too, and the town of Bagnères itself. But the Adour, which would have inspired people in the Middle Ages and earlier as it now inspired me, was like a lifeline. I would stop on the bridge and try to lose myself in the rapids of the energetic river. Here was something I needed: something fresh, vital and uncontaminated. I needed the river to enter into my bloodstream. Yes, I needed new blood.

I was sad and Baba said as much when I sent her some photos. “I find you sad.” She then went on to describe how pointless it was reading Le Monde during the summer (nothing happening in the world), and then, more worrying for me, how life faces you with many tests and how as youth diminishes each ‘test’ becomes harder to face. Wouldn’t the wisest thing be for me to actually throw myself into the Adour before all these tests came my way?

Rosa found me sad too. She would speak to us about life in the Soviet Union. She tried to reach me: “Sasha est triste quand je parle de l’Union Soviétique.” (Alex is sad when I talk about the Soviet Union). Was that why I was sad? One day Rosa had joined me for lunch and she said, “You know, you will meet a lot of people but you will also find out that people always stick to their own.” Didn’t I already know that? In my experience, people did not even stick to their own.

“I have seen so much break up of families,” Baba had repeated to me. Families in fragments, that was my experience.

The summer course seemed to have been a lot of drinks in local cafes with our choice of a song from the juke box. And myself a remote participator in the organised ‘fun’.
There had been a ‘Left Bank’ soirée (we must have been on the left bank of the Adour), complete with French jokes, Spanish, Puerta Rican and Catalan songs, and Arabic dancing. I enjoyed one of the French jokes which took place in a café (it was about food, of course). The waiter asks his client politely how he finds his steak. The answer comes, ‘By chance, monsieur, when I push aside the chips.’ Clumsy and faux-naïf, this was my kind of joke.

There was also an outdoor ‘boum’ complete with log fire and ‘crêpes’. But, overall, I hardly smiled at all. I seemed to be elsewhere. Such a contrast to the previous summer in Strasbourg where German came to me as naturally as English. The Russian was more difficult of course but I found my mind going blank, unable to take in a lot of what was being taught.

In the evenings, just before it became completely dark, I would step outside the dormitory building and drink in the darkening silhouettes of the mountains, sometimes with the moonlight on them, sometimes in cloud. The powerful but somehow incomprehensible impact of these mountains reassured me that what I was experiencing was all part of it: that life was much bigger than just me. I felt submerged and overlooked, but I also felt looked after.

On the train trip ‘home’ from rain in Tarbes to rain in Paris, I read on in Maurice Mességué’s book on healing with plants. I had not been strong enough to join the excursions high up into the Pyrénées, and now, the idea of taking camomile baths and drinking and eating mostly raw food during a Paris winter and in a grimy room at the Cité U looked impossible - but challenging.

* * *
Before facing the inevitable in Paris at the beginning of another university year, I did spend some more time away. Peter had enrolled in a German language summer school in Freiburg in Germany for the month of August. He suggested I meet him there. My passion for languages still shone.

However, I was so ill on the train trip that I hardly saw the beautiful Rhineland scenery gliding by. I was lucky to be in a carriage with a friendly German woman and we shared mineral water and conversation. It was she who woke me up from a feverish sleep in time for Freiburg saying that she thought I was not well.

The unreal feeling of a high temperature helped me to cope. The station was not far from the old city and here I found myself a room in a lovely Black Forest inn just behind Freiburg cathedral. I could not have been luckier with the accommodation. I signed my name on the hotel register, took my bags up the wooden stairs, and found my room just as a great storm burst over the town. My temperature was now so high that I crawled into the bed for a long, deep sleep. I slept right through the night. I did not have time to feel lonely. Delirious dreams and a fever provide a kind of ozone layer. The next morning I felt so much better and was able to enjoy a breakfast of coffee and black bread in the hotel dining room. I felt very at home in the ‘hof’ and a part of the family.

I then waited in the old town square to meet Peter and watched people come and go as if it was part of a Medieval pageant which I was watching from a great distance. I felt alienated in a way I had never felt before. Freiburg was not quite real for me except in the quiet moments in the hotel where I enjoyed the simplicity of washing my clothes, writing some postcards, stirring my coffee and eating the fruit which I had bought at the market.

I recognised one of the figures in the pageant as Peter. He looked
very at home in the German setting. But I heard him and spoke to him in a blur. I was sad at my inability to tune into him. When Peter had to return to the afternoon session of his course, I went and sat in the half-light of Freiburg cathedral, in its stillness and silence. I had lost my focus: I was too removed from and too close up to everything. The perspective was uncomfortable, like a burden coming between me and living. What was the point of seeing a thorough German doctor when the French doctor at Bagnères had found me large and therefore full of life? Also, understudying Alvaro had given me a ‘psychosomatic’ view of myself. I sat in the cathedral hoping to be cured of my terrible inner world.

I lost my room at the Black Forest inn because I had only booked it from day to day. I could not think more than a day ahead. Peter said he had heard of a place called Margarete Pension just outside Freiburg and he helped me to carry my bags to a dirty, noisy, cell-like room. Nice and cheap for students. I knew I was out of my depth. I was no student keen to rough it and come face to face with ‘reality’. One sleepless night at the pension was enough. A group of tall, blond young men from Heidelberg were staying at the place and they enjoyed bashing on the doors as they returned to their rooms. As I heard my door shake, I remember thinking in a detached, aged kind of way, “Well, they are German, after all - and young!”

Peter said he could find me some room on the floor in the flat where he was staying with some German students. I moved again, this time to the beautiful-sounding ‘Stühlingerstrasse’. The dress I had washed and ironed at the ‘hof’ was now rather crushed but I sat in it in the kitchen, feeling very bovine, like some dumb beast, who was being shunted from one pen to another. And I admired Peter in his role as overseas student. It was a role which suited him and which he played to perfection, dressed in black jeans and a polo neck t-shirt which looked good with his springy hair. Peter cooked us an omelette over a period of hours. This was because he was explaining
to me that he had been doing some writing and was intent on writing a novel. He viewed writing as something which was a pleasure and a challenge. I was very uncomprehending of such a view but did not let on. Then, while he chopped up some things to put into the omelette, he handed me a quite thick section of his writing, the opening section. He had written so much and this was only the beginning. His writing, like his conversation, ploughed through the waves creating turbulence and a mist of sea spray, causing a lot of excitement among the seagulls. It was an event. Humbly, I put it down and reminded Peter not to burn the oil in the frying pan. Peter sighed. Why was Alex so practical? Why couldn't she be airborne too? He looked at me exasperated. I was a romantic dream gone wrong.

Peter had charmed the other students at ‘Stühlinger’ as Peter referred to it very professionally. Uve and Angelika were courteous, dignified, blond, and good-looking. Angelika had long hair which seemed to have been spun from pure gold and Uve brushed it for her in a trance.

I pronounced Angelika’s name perfectly as I asked to borrow her iron. Ironing was another way of trying to get a grip on things.

One morning the four of us sat at the round table for breakfast which was beautifully set out with jams, honey, cheese, salami and rye bread, while Uve served us with strong, fresh black coffee. Peter and I excelled ourselves with our German. Angelika explained that she had been a student in Cologne but she had found it too stressful and alienating. “Too many modern buildings (Zuviel moderne Gebäude),” she said. I looked out of the large bay window of their older-style flat thoughtfully. Would Alexandra ever be like Angelika, able to follow her heart so simply and naturally?

Uve and Angelika offered to take us into the Black Forest in their VW (natürlich). They took us to a lookout called Feldberg from where we looked out over a lake called the Schlugsee. Then they
drove us to another lake, the Titisee, where we picnicked on a lovely old terrace and ordered coffees. A crowd of Franciscan sparrows gathered at our feet and gentle Uve threw them crumbs from our picnic. I wished I could be more like Uve, more simple, more able to look around me. “Why are you so still, Alexandra?” he asked. The German word ‘still’ evoked exactly my paralysed state as I brooded over my coffee. “I don’t know,” I replied. Angelika would have found an answer like “Not enough love or sunshine or hope or laughter” and have solved my problem on the spot.

We hired a boat and had a ride on the lake in the sun. It was a wonderful end to the outing. And then it was homeward. The German word ‘heimwegs’ pleased me so much, as it would have Baba.

The strangely unreal week in Freiburg came to an end. I went out to the market and bought Angelika a huge bunch of yellow flowers as a way of thanking her and Uve for their hospitality. Peter promised to contact me when he came to Paris in the autumn, but I was not so sure I wanted to be found.

* * *
AUTUMN AGAIN

AUTUMN DAY

Lord, it is time. The huge summer has gone by. Now overlap the sundials with your shadows, and on the meadows let the wind go free.

* * *

Command the fruits to swell on tree and vine; grant them a few more warm transparent days, urge them on to fulfillment then, and press the final sweetness into the heavy wine.

* * *

Whoever has no house now, will never have one. Whoever is alone will stay alone, will sit, read, write long letters through the evening, and wander on the boulevards, up and down, restlessly, while the dry leaves are blowing.

Rainer Maria Rilke

It was autumn again. Paris in September was at her glorious, golden best: regal, generous, breathtaking and unforgettable. All the trees of the avenues and parks were radiant gold. It was a good time of year for me: a time for long walks, for organising and settling down and for inwardly preparing for that very European experience which I had missed so much in Sydney: winter.
As long as you had an overcoat, boots, gloves and a scarf, winter in Paris was very aesthetically pleasing. So I was able to enjoy the Paris autumn without dread and to look forward to the various shades of grey characteristic of Paris, from charcoal to pale almost white-grey, which the black bare trees would highlight. Winter, too, was a time of contrast: the cafes became cosier, the lights in the picturesque pâtisseries and delicatessens came on early, making winter afternoons festive. And people huddled together more. Winter, unexpectedly, was a very gregarious time.

Back at the Cité U for the beginning of the university year, I got myself a new room as part of an attempt to make a fresh start, a small, intimate, attic-like room on the top floor of the college. It was too small for partying and I no longer had grand plans for being very social. My new room was a refuge and I fully expected to see the winter out in monk-like solitude.

This time around, I finally got myself organised. Slowly but determinedly I tackled Claude Simon’s Conducting Bodies. The title held possibilities - endless ones if you were imaginative - but the book itself none.

Into this organised, disciplined, strict person’s life entered Mandy. She had arrived from London on an art scholarship and by sheer luck for me she was in the room next to mine. We quickly became friends in spite of or perhaps because of my now experienced, aloof stance.

Mandy was very attractive, self-assured, and warm. Everything I wanted to be but thought I was not. She also appeared wonderfully autonomous and I envied her that above all things. Inside myself I felt like a bird trapped in a net, fluttering, bewildered, and realizing finally that the best I could do was to fold up my wings and keep very still.

“I’m writing a thesis on Claude Simon - he writes experimental novels. I’m interested in novels and in something called
Structuralism,” I announced deceptively.

Mandy was so impressed that she hid her non-comprehension beautifully: “Who is this Claude Simon?” “He’s a writer. He lives in Paris.” Why didn’t I visit him then? Visit him? I felt far too unsure of myself to tell Mandy that I thought the French ‘New Novel’ was a hideous dead end and its author, a corpse. On the other hand, whenever I went past the place where I knew ‘Claude’ lived (in the literate fifth arrondissement), I always felt guilty. I was taking up someone else’s space. Someone else would have looked on an interview with Claude Simon as a research highlight. As it turns out, he did go on to win the Nobel prize for literature, though, personally, I would not have described his writing as ‘literature’.

Mandy’s work looked so much more colourful and alive (as she was) though I felt out of my depth with her ‘collages’ inspired by photos (good ones, I could see that) of piles of dead leaves, grave stones, pumps and depressing back lanes.

Her Personal Life was where I felt more at home. “Problems with my boyfriend. More on that later.” I was not alarmed, I knew I would hear all about it very soon.

“Here’s a photo of me at eighteen when I first met Geoff.”

It was an absolutely beautiful photo of a young girl with masses of reddish gold hair, pale skin and grey-green intelligent eyes. “Geoff made me what I am.” Made you what you are? I gazed in amazement at the photo, and with envy at Mandy.

She was impressed with my militaristic lifestyle, my version of Maurice Messegué. What did I have for breakfast? Café au lait and fruit from the local street market. Now I saw Mandy with her café au lait and novel (useful for keeping ‘dragueurs’ at bay) in the college breakfast room. She gave off all the right signals: “I’m approachable, but on my terms.”

What about lunch? More café and a golden delicious apple (un goal-den). Sometimes some cottage cheese. Fruit from the market
quickly became part of the decor of Mandy’s room. She blossomed on my diet. I wish I had. She lent me Hemingway’s A Moveable Feast about his time in Paris. I started reading again (for pleasure, that is). Mandy humanised this famous name for me by referring to him as ‘Hem’ (as his friends had called him), and she took the mystique out of books for me by seeing them simply as something you snuggled up with last thing at night while also snuggling up to your man. It was nonetheless still clear to me that Claude Simon was not someone you went to bed with.

“So this thesis, how do you go about it?” Mandy was intrigued by the mysteries of scholarly life. “After breakfast I go to the Sainte Geneviève library.” I had selected this library because it was old and dignified and in a very beautiful part of Paris. It was in fact at the scholarly centre of Paris, surrounded by some of the top high schools, various ‘institutes’ and an old building called ‘the Sorbonne’ which looked like what you thought the Sorbonne should look like. “Here I read, take notes and write until I can’t bear it any longer. Then I go out for a coffee (un crème), then return to the library.” The return to the library was like a descent into the mine. Mandy knew I must be a formidable student, so committed to my work. Yes, I was: it was my new-found anaesthetic.

Mandy’s ‘work’ was less lonely: it included photographic expeditions around Paris with good-looking Yugoslav architects or handsome young English photographers. Then back to the college for mutual sessions in the darkroom and cups of coffee to discuss the negatives. There was something very social about being an artist, I thought. And something solitary and enclosed about writing. I began to buy art postcards for my desk: Picasso’s blues and pinks (all Spaniards naturally), Rodin, Vasarely. Art was IN. Discussions were IN. We discussed Art, Family, Men, my ‘thesis’ and Mandy’s ‘work’ which she approached with the same discipline that I did mine.

I would see her early in the morning, so straight and alert, with
her beautiful hair tied up stylishly, making her way to the college ‘studio’ which was up in the attic. I did not know it existed until Mandy arrived, but I realized later that a British college would be incomplete without an attic. I would watch her almost jealously thinking she had to be one of the most wonderful people I could have met in Paris. I was not wrong. I treasured every moment of her friendship.

Like me, she had to be self-motivated. “But I've learnt a lot from my boyfriend about work and how that glass of wine tastes so much better at the end of a day’s work.” ‘So, you don’t start the day with a glass of wine, bohemian and therefore crowd-pleasing as that may be,’ I thought.

Geoff was much older than Mandy. “The age gap has become a problem for me,” she said. He had been one of her teachers at art school. And his words of experience reached me as I tried to give my life a shape. It was clear that real artists did not begin the day with a glass of wine or lie in bed all day with someone very attractive. I thought of Victorino. As a deserter from the Spanish army and a Communist, he had a strong romantic appeal. He seemed to spend a lot of time in bed (not alone), a lot of time, any time, drinking black coffee or Spanish cognac. Also, there was the Maria y Juan. But I could not keep up with this. I was an early rising, cold shower and hard work kind of person. So Geoff’s suggestions (which I received via Mandy) were interesting for me. They resolved a conflict, as they say.

No, real artists were dedicated to their work. The secret was to find something creative which really did inspire dedication. Claude Simon did not. Each day could then become a work of art in itself. The rhythms of the day, the changing light, the seasons, the people who came and went, all were part of one’s work as an artist. Only at the end of the day, like a peasant after he had put his tools away, did one reach out for that glass of wine which tasted now so much better
than if you had had it for breakfast.

I listened attentively: the art of living could now be a life-long project. Geoff restored magic to my disillusioned state. ‘Reality’ did not have to be a sad, faded, anonymous experience. It could be a discovery and a pleasure. No wonder, after the disappointments of the previous year, that I was overjoyed at the Mandy-Geoff approach to living. And Mandy was its radiant example.

So, as I set off each morning for the Sainte Geneviève library, I found Geoff’s advice worked for me too: with my work at the centre, things came to life around me. The cafe near the library where I went every day was highlighted in its Parisian charm by my methodical reading of the Russian Formalists and Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure had inspired people to think about language as something alive, creative, and almost magical, and I talked excitedly to Alvaro about this original Swiss linguist. Alvaro listened, as he always did to me, with great interest and attention. He was a superb listener. The buzz word was ‘arbitrary’. The linguistic sign (word) was arbitrary. Saussure had a way of explaining ‘arbitrary’ so that I did not get downhearted.

When the library felt too oppressive, I would take one of Claude Simon’s novels with me to a cafe and read it there. Unfortunately, I had to read all his novels. One cafe, which was on the corner of rue Gay Lussac and the boulevard Saint Michel, was popular with students and staff from the nearby Institut d’Etudes Hispaniques. Here, I could sit behind the glass but still feel part of the busy colourful intersection. I took Claude Simon’s incomprehensible Triptyque there knowing that the distractions of the cafe would make it more bearable. It was just before Christmas and three teachers from the institute came in for an end-of-session meal of steak frites, vin rouge and fromage bleu. It all smelt delicious. I was sitting close by in my depressing black jacket eating my slimming ‘Goal-den’ and staring at Claude Simon. “How do you translate this word?” “There are
various nuances,” came the true linguistic reply, “and then again, it depends on whether one is in South America or Spain.” One of them was going to Madrid for Christmas. He often went there: he liked it a lot. “Garçon, un quart de Vichy, s’il vous plaît.”

In the early autumn evenings, as I emerged from the library with my five hours under my imaginary belt, I would drink Paris in and imagine I had a real life in this romantic city with its tough, objective heart, instead of my peripheral, tentative existence. Back to the Cité U and to the sheer luxury of linking up with Mandy. She, like Victorino, became ‘home’.

But, whatever measures I took, more work in the library, a healthy diet, and involving myself as much as possible with the life around me, I still found myself too quickly tired, too easily run-down.

I dressed like a student: baggy jeans, my father’s shirts and an old jumper of his from ten years back which I had found hanging in a cupboard at rue Lecourbe. Baba used to comment on the ‘fashions’: nothing tucked in, everything loose and hanging. Mandy was more glamorous. She tucked things in. She dressed to reveal rather than to hide. Besides, there was an ironing problem at the college. The iron was rarely in working order. So I gave up on ironing and stuck to my outsize jeans which became baggier and baggier as my new diet began to work for me. I added my own touch to this outfit: a scarf which I tied cravate-like around my neck and which emphasised an often strangely swollen face.

Every day I did my ‘footing’ around the grounds of the Cité U. Victorino had given up long ago on ‘le footing’ but he called out ‘La Puritana’ as I ran past. He sounded angry and I was upset. I felt I had failed Victorino by ending up alone. My focus now was less intense. My new start at the Cité U was like a new life. There was almost no continuity from the year before. Over the summer I seemed to have grown apart from recent connections, even Alvaro was further away.
On one of my visits to rue Lecourbe, Baba gave me an information leaflet on the ‘Third Orthodox Congress of Western Europe’. “Antony Bloom will be there,” she said. Metropolitan Antony, an old family friend of the Pianoff family and the reason why I proudly wrote or ticked ‘Russian Orthodox’ on the religion line, was based in London. The Orthodox Congress was to be held at Amiens on the 11th, 12th and 13th of November. I knew that Amiens was not far to the north of Paris. I surprised Baba and myself when I said, “Maybe I’ll go!”

I almost didn’t. I was not feeling at all well. As with many things in my life at this time, I had to force myself. And I was rewarded by a kind of ‘interior revolution’. This is what Alvaro had wanted for me but not in this way. As it turned out, Bloom himself was not well enough to come. I found the three days no less wonderful for that. However, not being well myself, I also felt very unhappy and, not knowing anyone, overwhelmed by loneliness. And yet, I came away feeling that a spark from some great fire had caught alight in me.

A large number of Roumanian priests were there and I was struck by their dignity. One in particular, a very elderly Father Stanisloe, was memorable. It was a pleasure just to sit close to him in his silence.

There were many services over the three days building up to a most wonderful mass on the Sunday complete with candles and choir. Swept up in the proceedings, I joined the choir. Part of the mass included confession. We simply lined up and spoke briefly to one of the priests. It took great courage to join the line of people. I felt so ashamed of myself for being so unhappy. The priest looked very nice, very fatherly when I got up to him. I knew I would have to tell him the awful truth: “I’m terribly lonely” I said.

“Then you must reach out to people,” he answered. “You must seek not so much to be understood as to understand, to receive as to give.” This sounded so tough but I needed the guidelines desperately. Then he said, “It is not such a bad thing to be so alone - you have more time to be with Christ. Pray to him every day.” This sounded
more comforting. Finally he said, “Is there anyone you resent?” A few people sprang to mind but I was silent. Sagely assuming there had to be someone, he added, “Then you must forgive them with all your heart.” I took a deep breath and tried to make a dent in my resentment. After this confession I felt, literally, as though a great weight had been lifted from me.

Before I left Amiens to take the train back to Paris, I bought two books, Antony Bloom’s School for Prayer and a little book of Russian prayers, also in French, called a Philocalia. Father Stanisloe had mentioned the Philocalia, so, in an attempt to become more like him, I decided I needed to read it. And Antony Bloom’s School for Prayer might put me in touch with Christ and put an end to my loneliness.

I came back to my room at the Cité U and read Antony Bloom’s book almost non-stop. It was a revelation. I seemed to find myself in every word as though he were speaking to me and only me. The Russian simplicity of his approach appealed to me. I needed some simplicity. As the days grew colder and we all knew there would be snow in Paris this winter, I thought about Bloom’s image of each new day being like a field covered with snow on which no-one had stepped. Looking ahead, I could see the possibility of the future being free of the burdens of the past. ‘Amazing,’ I thought, as I woke up, opened my curtains and looked out onto the winter bleakness of the Cité U park, ‘Antony Bloom says this day has never been lived before. Elle est toute vierge.’ It was difficult for me to assess, in the context of the Cité U, whether it was more advantageous to be or not to be like Antony Bloom’s day: ‘virgin’. With Russian simplicity I concluded that love transcended such petty distinctions.

Now I added prayer to my regime of five hours in the library and a strict diet. And lo! and behold! the friends came rolling in. I was inundated.

This new life of prayer took me up to the end of 1977. It was a
great relief when I reached the last day of the year. It had been far
too tough a year for me, and a humiliating one. Not that I needed to
be ‘cut down to size’. It was a mysterious year for me too but I
somehow understood on this last day that the unhappy chain of
experiences was behind me now and that I would begin to live again.

Paris was more impersonal than ever. My future here now had a
cryptic quality which I found strangely satisfying. I did not want to
know what lay ahead. Alvaro and Victorino often seemed like figures
from another lifetime now, and I saw myself as just one of thousands
and thousands of overseas students who had passed through the Cité
U.

I had decided to make the most of the international Cité and
enrolled in yoga classes at the Indian House and German classes run
by the Goethe Institute at the German House.

It was a pleasure to turn up at the ‘German House’ and to listen
to our kind teacher who conducted the entire class in German. She
reminded me of the woman I had met on the train trip to Freiburg. In
my strange state it could have been the same woman hovering into
and out of my life. Being autumn again, it was cold enough to wear
my deathly black jacket even indoors. I did not miss a single class. I
was resolute, disciplined, and focussed right away from
‘relationships’ (which did not seem to work for me anyway). Besides,
temperamentally, I was ‘German’ not ‘Spanish’. I was overweight,
methodical, and obedient.

Our German teacher gave us some of Rilke’s poems to learn off
by heart saying this was a good way of learning a language. And that
is just what I did, back in my room or on the bus. Rilke’s poem
‘Autumn’ picked up for me the feeling I had that I was alone,
unsettled, and awaiting at twenty-three years, the winter of my life.
Sometimes, though, I did not hear what our teacher was saying. I
was lost in a pile of autumn leaves, almost buried by them.
“Alexandra? Alexandra? Are you sure you’re okay?” “Of course I’m
okay,” I replied, startled. No-one was going to cope better with winter than me.

I also attended some lectures on ‘Comparative Literature’ at the depressing Section III of the New Sorbonne where I was enrolled. The professor of Russian Literature, a Frenchman, gave talks on Russian writers. Few attended. Once, I was the only one. He arrived keen and ready to share and we both waited for some real students to turn up. Finally he said to me, “Shall we proceed anyway?” I could not bear to let him down, so I sat patiently and heard about this Russian who had been given a German name, ‘Herzen’. What stuck in my mind, since I had a heart too, was that he was illegitimate and had been christened ‘Ein Kind des Herzens’ (a child of the heart). It seemed a wonderful fate to me and far more exciting than any writing he went on to produce.

I also needed to see my thesis supervisor from time to time. She would look at my work and be surprised that I had produced anything coherent. Her woman’s intuition worked overtime with me: all was not clear. Something was missing in the picture with this quasi-Australian Alex. There was not enough ironing going on, or cups of tea, or mindless trips to the supermarket with a huge trolley. I was not running dazed into enough shelves or people.

I had one attempt at sitting in on a seminar which might give substance to my work on Claude Simon. It was held at an impressive ‘School for Higher Studies’ which specialised in linguistic analyses of literature. One was encouraged as a student to sit in on as many seminars or public lectures as possible. Now, here was my gesture towards stimulating and unique educational opportunities. I knew Paris very well now and was able to track down ‘Higher Studies’. I should have given myself more credit for getting this right. The room where the seminar was held had aluminium windows, concrete walls and harsh lighting. It reminded me of a hospital theatre, a place where really intricate surgery requiring a very steady hand would take place.
The building seemed to be either not quite completed or preparing for demolition. We waited a very long time for the seminar leader to appear. This was part of it: more time to get restless and uncomfortable. I sat at one of the laminex tables which had been joined to the other tables to form a conference-style set-up. There were handouts concerning a Lithuanian linguist who was big in Paris at the time, Greimas. He would certainly merit a footnote in my thesis. The most exciting part of my thesis would take place in the footnotes.

Everyone in the seminar room looked very pale. A few lit cigarettes. I knew now that though a lot of young people smoked in Paris, that the cigarette hanging out of the mouth while you talked was not as prevalent as I had been misled to believe. By the time the seminar leader appeared, I knew I would not be back. It was a far too adult experience for me. I watched the late afternoon light change outside the windows making the room even bleaker, and I wondered what kind of life the people in this room would be going back to that evening. Surely not so strange a life as mine.

I was still hanging around on the periphery of what Mandy referred to as ‘my Spanish cloud’. This was how I met the two Joses, Jose Manel and Jose Luis. Just as the previous Spanish encounter had been distinguished by the host of ‘Miguels’, this more recent Catalan encounter had as its code name ‘Jose’.

Jose Manel was from Barcelona and accordingly had a more cosmopolitan outlook than either Victorino or Alvaro. He was very courteous. It was with him that I went to hear the Catalan singer Lluis Llach that December. Jose Manel was impressed that I knew of this singer and was familiar with so many of his songs. I remember the evening so clearly. I was wearing a cheap black velvet dress (an attempt at elegance). Jose Manel wore a thick dark overcoat that suited his shiny black hair and wax-coloured skin. We went to the théâtre Le Palace in rue du Faubourg Montmartre and the place was
packed with an audience as keen as myself. An unexpectedly fragile-looking Lluis Llach appeared on the stage. “You know that he’s so shy that for his first public appearance they had to push him on stage?” said Jose Manel.

For me, Lluis Llach’s voice and the Catalan songs were the language of love. He was the troubadour who told us all what was in our hearts. ‘A la taberna del mar’ (‘At the tavern by the sea’) was about an old man who had never ‘lived’, who was weeping for a youth not fully lived. I knew now though that it was only in one’s heart that one ever fully lived.

When Lluis Llach was about to sing his song ‘Laura’, Jose Manel said to me, “You know he’s homosexual, Lluis Llach?” Laura was one of his accompanists. She was not the great passion of his life after all. ‘La-u-ra’. The song was deceptive.

As we came home on the bus to the Cité U, Jose Manel told me how he and his father were tennis fans and often stayed up late into the night watching tennis tournaments. He mentioned a few Australian players but I had never heard these names. Instead, I knew almost word for word Lluis Llach’s Catalan songs.

It was one of those very clear winter nights when the stars - even in Paris - stood out powerfully against the black sky. They reminded me of the stars as I had seen them on that memorable first train trip across the Pyrénées and into Spain. Jose Manel was an astrophysicist and we looked at the Northern Sky together. He pointed out the Pole star and the constellation of Orion. When he told me about ‘dwarf stars’ I shivered. That light came from a source that had died millions of years ago.

After the New Year break (it was now 1978) Jose Manel came and knocked on my door. In his hands he had a record. “I brought this back for you from Barcelona. In Catalonia the really famous singer is Raimon (‘Rye-e-monn’).” I looked at Raimon's handsome, serious face on the cover of the record. Jose Manel pulled out the
words from inside the record cover and said, “This is his most famous song, ‘Al Vent’ (he pronounced it ‘Al Bent’ - ‘The Wind’). The words were very like Latin. Jose explained, “This is life: the wind on my face, on my body, on my hands . . . Life is full of pain and tears. You know,” he said, “we are a very sober people really.” As if this was something I had not fully realized.

I was able to borrow a record player and to listen to the Catalan ‘dirges’ in my room, trying to piece together delirious Victorino and sober José. The songs were very elemental, they were about love, death, the night, youth. They were austere.

The other Jose, Jose Lluis, was also from Barcelona. He looked not unlike Raimon on the record cover. I met him when I was visiting Alvaro. He asked me to help him with some English-French translations, and, to thank me for my help, he took me out for a drink at the unappealing Le Fleurus. He was returning soon to Barcelona where he would join up again with his wife, Pilar. The beautiful Spanish name evoked I thought someone very pretty and devoted. Jose Luis liked to talk - a lot. And I was interested to hear his fresh impressions of Paris and of the Cité U.

He said that he was missing Pilar and how he had this intellectual desire to be with another woman. Intellectual?

So, I thought, the Cité U is an emotional minefield for us all. And I was working hard at maintaining my distance. Then we began to talk about Alvaro and Victorino. He saw them in a more mundane light. “Here is Paris with all its treasures, and they are simply not interested! It is as if they had never left Spain.” He then pulled out the appropriate Spanish proverb to illustrate the mentality of those who never really leave home. I thought about how Alvaro had said that Spain was retarded (‘Es una tarada’ ‘It is a crippled country’) and needed to grow again now that General Franco was dead. But it had not occurred to me that he and Victorino might themselves be caught in this prison.
“The world is larger than Victorino and Alvaro, you know,” said Jose Luis.

Jose Luis spoke to me about Spain. “It is a country of contradictions. When we are serious we do not really mean it. When we joke we are serious.”

“And what about you, Alessandra?”

“I am trying to finish this thesis but my heart’s not in it.” Where was my heart?

“You need to go back to Australia. That’s where you belong.” Then he added, “You know, Alessandra, I feel that you have been unlucky. But you will be lucky later, believe me.”

He said it in such a positive way that he gave me hope and I felt stars come to my eyes.

* * *

Christmas this year was celebrated chez Kobykansky and it had the light and shade and beauty that Mandy would have approved. Catherine had decorated the table, using silver foil in place of a table cloth, so that, when she lit the numerous tall candles, they reflected off the silver. In the flickering light we enjoyed turkey with chestnut stuffing followed by vanilla and chocolate ice-cream, and Marcelle brought out all her best silver and glassware, from Switzerland. We toasted many people, summoning up their presence as if at a seance. At the end of the meal Catherine lit her long pipe - a Christmas present - and sat back. She looked like a gypsy - one who had travelled with a caravan carrying spices and silks. After the meal I helped Marcelle to carry plates back to the tiny kitchen and she said, “Catherine worries me the most, Sonia. She is so dangerously lacking in initiative. You know, Sonia, there is something in my daughters which makes them strangers to me, something Russian. Anne is more like me in character, more Swiss.” We came back into the dining
room where a large plate of nuts in their shells, and mandarins, was placed in the centre of the table. Anne was wrapped in a black shawl, her long brown hair tied up in a bun. She looked like a widow, a young woman in a Breton fishing village when a knock at the door tells her that her husband has been lost at sea. But, since she was only a movie set widow, she looked quite rosy and unperturbed by her imminent fate.

As the evening moved out of its celebratory phase and into its reflective phase, André looked more pale and more morbid. “I was thinking about something you don’t think about at your age, Sonia, I was thinking about death.” Time to bring out the vodka. André brought out some of his old 78 records of high-pitched Russian choirs, all women, and Catherine and Anne looked pained. We needed to end on a lighter note, so André put on a record of specifically Parisian songs by the old-timer, Charles Trenet. We listened to the song, ‘Fleur Bleue’, about a young girl whom the singer has glimpsed in Paris and who has inspired him. Paris specialised in fleeting encounters. Weighed down by massive undefined burdens, I felt sad as the song ended. I was wearing a pale blue scarf around my head, stylishly knotted but setting off my less than beautiful face. André offered me a blue flower, so to speak, when he tuned in and said, “Mais, Sonia, c’est toi fleur bleue!” (But, Sonia, you are Blue Flower).

At the end of the evening we all moved into the hall where I took my overcoat off its hook and put it on in preparation for the short walk back to Baba’s. We all exchanged the three kisses à la française (but also à la russe) and then Marcelle took me aside, “Come and look at this, Sonia, it’s one of Catherine’s abstracts which I had framed for Christmas. What do you think of it?” I was in training because of Mandy. “Very interesting.”

“You can say if you don’t like it,” said Marcelle, “but I think it’s very good. She’s very talented, you know.” Yes, I did know. Anne selected one of her repertoire of voices to say a warm good-bye before
I went down the five flights of wooden staircase and out into the cold night air.

The bleakness of the past year was lifting. Light was flooding into every part of my life. And the highlight of this life was the time spent with Mandy and Geoff. I invited Catherine to come and meet them and she joined us at the Cité U for some exhilarating evenings. Mandy, her hair out for the evening, served us red wine and even Catherine laughed at her jokes though she understood very few words. “Where did you find such wonderful people, Sonia?” she asked me. Mandy seemed to make those around her more wonderful too. Several speakers of English joined us in her room and added their own humour to the wit which the English language (that language I had turned my back on) lends itself to.

Mandy’s work was included in an exhibition by foreign student artists at the Cité des Arts which was not far from the Ile Saint Louis. I admired her unfathomable, professional collages and saw in an instant that they were easily the best ‘art’ on show at that exhibition. We stood around with a glass of wine in our hands and murmured or listened to murmurs from other art students from Yugoslavia, Japan, Iran and Lebanon. I was proud of Mandy, proud that her hard work had produced such excellent results. In every way she was an inspiration to me. She combined what I feared was impossible: intelligence and common-sense with artistic talent, a sense of adventure with a sense of stability, a warm heart with a strong mind.

Some of the magic of Paris was coming back again but, this time, strongly influenced by Mandy and Geoff, I saw my own life and the city through less romantic but more ‘artistic’ eyes. For the painter or the photographer or the dreamer Paris’ magic could always be there. Even my changing states could be part of it. The Cité U was a unique place and Mandy and Geoff, less overwhelmed than me, laughed at its strangeness. The collège Franco-britannique became a film set, the disconnected life lived out in its rooms and in
the echoing corridors was they said inevitably bizarre. Their English humour was so refreshing. I could smile now at things which had worried me the previous year.

Geoff often came from England to stay with Mandy for the weekend. He was reserved and good-looking and had the courtesy of an English knight. I joined them both sometimes for the evening and Geoff showed me some of his sketches. Geoff’s work was more traditional and recognisable to me. He was a craftsman. Mandy, in contrast, was innovative and not satisfied unless she produced something challenging and unexpected. As she said to me often, “I don’t believe in undiscovered country.” She was not alarmed by Claude Simon as I was. Then again, she did not have to read him. She heard about him and about ‘Structuralism’ through me. I would have packaged it all nicely, made it very palatable, and, for her benefit, made it sound like a thrilling adventure. She brought out unacknowledged talents in me as a window-dresser.

Mandy was feeling liberated by ‘the Paris experience’ and was looking at Geoff with new, dissatisfied eyes. “We’ve been together for six years and now I’m beginning to feel that I need to be with someone my own age so we can explore and discover together. Geoff has already been married. He has children. These experiences are not new for him.” Geoff came more often to Paris looking drawn, almost anguished, to keep a jealous eye on Mandy.

How could you turn your back on six fulfilling years with the man who has been the making of you? But I knew one could do just that and often did. In the meantime, I simply marvelled at this miracle: a rewarding relationship with a man that lasts longer than a week? Mandy clearly had charms which I lacked and skills which I had failed to pick up.

But I had picked up something: even though I was not feeling very well, I still drank in the luxury of working at the library near the Panthéon in the Quartier Latin, and enjoyed (now that I was hopefully
an artist in the making) more consciously the rose-grey sunsets over
the grey stone nineteenth century apartments as I emerged from an
afternoon's work. Like Geoff’s fine sketches, one needed both the
light and the shade to make the full picture.

My work in the library and often in my room in the evening
meant nothing to me. What I read, I summarised and labelled and
underlined and slotted into an appropriate part of my ‘thesis’. The
field of my work was irrelevant. French literary criticism, marine
biology, pharmacology, law or divinity, I would have applied myself
with the same mindless doggedness. What would have been another
person’s dream (to write about the work of a writer still living - or
half-living? - in Paris), was really a kind of poison for me. Except
that I switched off and managed to benefit from the discipline of the
work and the mastery of the French language that it gave me
.especially Parisian academic jargon). Alvaro at this stage was fairly
convinced that I was unwell because I had got myself into a minefield
academically-speaking. No, my minefield seemed to be men, which
included Claude Simon. Alvaro lent me Claude Lévi-Strauss’
autobiography of an anthropologist, Sad Tropics, and unintentionally
depressed me further: “You see, that’s what it’s like. You travel to
this distant paradise and find it ‘sad’.” The remedy, Alvaro said, was
for me to go home and to write my own work of anthropology.
Something like Paris, Paradise Lost or The Sad Seine.

For a start, I was not sure where ‘home’ was. Secondly, once I
had written this thesis, I knew that I would never want to write or
read again. Ever.

I could have attended lectures by Claude Lévi-Strauss, and I
‘should have’ visited Claude Simon. This is on my literary conscience.
Instead, I met and remembered forever people like Victorino and
Alvaro, Mandy and Geoff, the multi-coloured Kobylanskys and my
extraordinary Russian grandmother.

Paris did not become part of my soul though it became, as it
would for anyone, part of my inner decor. It was Spain that became part of my soul, with its proverbs, its dogmatism, its sombreness, its flashes of light, and its intensity and passion.

For a student in Paris, life was queues and throngs. Especially queues for the university restaurants, and queues to pick up scholarship money. After a year or more of staring entranced at the exotic Arab faces as I waited in my queue, I finally tuned off and began to pick up student newspapers which were always to be found at such places, often on the ground. I was surprised to find an English-speaking one and I leafed through it as though English was a foreign language. By now it almost was. By chance I came across a poem. It caught my eye because of its title, ‘Letter’. I knew about letters, those fragile but somehow very substantial links. Letters had always been part of my life: letters to my father, whom I had not grown up with, or to Baba, from Australia, and now letters ‘home’ from Paris, or cards to friends even in Paris. Letters had given me a sense of being linked closely with people in spite of distance. As I read the poem by Yehudi Amichal, translated from the Hebrew with the help of English poet Ted Hughes, the words stopped me in my tracks in the same way that Victorino often had. As my turn came to pick up my student allowance, I tore the poem out of the paper as if it were a piece of precious parchment. I was suddenly aware of a strong sense of not being alone: this poet and I, who had never seen each other, had nonetheless, one chance in a million, met. The Arab faces dissolved as I felt the poet’s presence beside me and imagined I could hear his voice.

To sit on the verandah of a hotel in Jerusalem
and to write: sweetly pass the days
from desert to sea. And to write: Tears, here
dry quickly. This little blot
is a tear that has melted ink. That’s how
they wrote a hundred years ago. “I have drawn a circle round it.”

Time passes - like somebody who, on a telephone, is laughing, or weeping far away from me: whatever I'm hearing I can’t see. And whatever I see I don't hear. We were not careful when we said “next year” Or “a month ago”. These words are like glass-splinters that you can hurt yourself with, or cut veins. Those who do things like that.

But you were beautiful like the interpretation of ancient books. Surplus of women in your far country brought you to me, but Other statistics have taken you away from me.

To live is to build a ship and a harbour at the same time. And to complete the harbour long after the ship was drowned.

And to finish: I remember only That there was mist. And whoever Remembers only mist - What does he remember?
I was speechless before the beauty of these words. But I was not the woman to whom the letter was addressed, I was the poet himself, caught in an eternal present of sitting, writing, remembering, and understanding. He had made his fragmented life whole through his poem, bringing together even his five senses which had been torn apart. Paris had been a time of profound aloneness for me, and it was a great comfort to hear this new voice which, at the same time, was a voice I recognized. I felt reconnected - with what, I could not say, possibly myself.

The poem had gone to my heart, and, in contrast, my work on Claude Simon felt even more alien. I remember returning to the Cité U, and going to see Alvaro. “I can’t do it. I can’t write this thesis. It feels too heavy to lift.” “Surely,” said Alvaro, “it is a human rather than a superhuman task.” I felt defeated. For me it felt like an inhuman task.

The next time that I went to visit the Kobylanskys, I admitted that I was feeling quite ill and on the losing end of a battle. Marcelle’s immediate reaction was that I was homesick. She said, “There’s a young doctor I know. He will be the right one for you to see.”

Fearfully I went to his surgery so sure that he would be another Alvaro and that I would be labelled as severely depressed and despatched to a large concrete building with small windows and a high wall around it - a place where you were called an inmate and not a patient. As soon as I met the doctor, I could see that Marcelle had been right. He was observant and intuitive and I had confidence in him. Through my tears I tried to explain how I was losing my battle with life. He listened but said very little. Then he wrote out a referral to the hospital opposite the Cité U saying, “You will need to go there to have this test done. Then come back and see me about the results.”

“So you really think that I am sick and that it’s not just ‘psychological’?”
I went straight to the hospital to make my appointment. I hardly felt motivated: it seemed that ‘psychological’ or ‘physical’ I was going to end up losing. As with the Paris university enrolment system, I found the hospital system too impersonal. The only appointment available was at 7 a.m. It would be dark and very cold. The test was very ‘simple’ - a biopsy without an anaesthetic.

For four weeks I tried to get up early enough to reach the hospital by 7 a.m. I kept having to cancel the appointment and then to re-make it. “You must have this test,” said Marcelle, but I was already too ill. Finally, I made another appointment with the young doctor and admitted defeat. He still said nothing about a diagnosis but he booked me into another hospital in the north of Paris, the Hôtel Saint Louis which specialised in diseases of the blood. I felt ill enough for this to be a relief. I actually wanted to go to the hospital. Still, amidst all my dreams and vague plans about my life in Paris, the one place I would never have pictured as part of my fate was a hospital.

Back at the Cité U, I located Mandy in her ‘belvedere’ which she also referred to as ‘that especially Franco-britannic space’. She always made me laugh with her terminology. She was the perfect person for me to turn to - a guardian angel. My memory of her is of someone who, like Victorino, radiated light wherever she went. She marked one of the biggest turning points of my life and I felt privileged to have met her. I was putting my boat out into a very dark ocean and Mandy had appeared like a pilot boat to guide me. Whenever I look at Sydney Harbour at night and see a blue pilot light skimming across the water, I am reminded of this time.

* * * *
HÔPITAL SAINT LOUIS

Mandy came with me to the hospital. It was an exceptionally cold winter and on the February morning she came with me on the metro, the snow was very deep. I remember literally trudging through the deep snow, Mandy carrying my bag into the shabby, grimy grounds of the very old Hôpital Saint Louis. As everyone is at first, I was afraid of the smell of the hospital, and of the thought of a general anaesthetic. The mere thought was traumatic. My fluent French was now a godsend. Mandy left, but she promised to return the next day just as the anaesthetic wore off.

My life was being taken out of my hands dramatically and this was a tremendous relief. I was exhausted from struggling for so long against an unknown enemy. It was a very happy moment when I gave up my battle and handed myself over to Fate.

Coming out of the anaesthetic, I again experienced a flood of relief. And this gave me the strength to survive whatever was to come next. As I lay in splendour amid white sheets and Kobylansky red tulips: “Vous avez une maladie typique,” said the white coat standing over me. Nothing extraordinary about my illness. Just something average and typical. Reluctantly, I saw this was a plus.

“Alors, vous allez vous guérir typiquement,” (‘So you will have a typical recovery’) was the Hospital Humour prognosis.

“Vous avez la maladie de Otch-keen.”

‘Otch-keen’ meant nothing to me, but, when the doctor spelt it, I was tremendously disappointed: ‘H-O-D-G-K-I-N’. The name of my disease was completely unromantic - stodgy in fact. Why didn’t I have leukemia or toxoplasmosis or paranoia? I could see the sympathy cards flooding in as I wasted away in my Paris attic. Victorino, touched to the core, would swear to stick by me forever (which could not be long in my case). But my sickness had a cure and I could tell by its name that it would be a long hard haul for me.
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L’Hôpital SAINT-LOUIS

vous accueille...
It was a very serious, rare illness: cancer of the body’s lymphatic system but at an early enough stage to be curable. I was to meet other people in the hospital who had such an advanced stage of Hodgkin’s disease that they would die. I had been stopped in my tracks by this illness. My recent life somehow mirrored the inner illness. Now it was clear why I had felt weighed down, almost paralysed as in a dream. Unable to spread my wings and fly, I had been at the mercy of the life around me. I threw everything into the cure. Only later did I have to accept that, even cured, this illness would mark me for life.

The next day I was wheeled off for a lymphography. Having turquoise-coloured liquid pumped up the veins in my legs was just made bearable by the incredibly pretty colour my veins turned to (real blue blood) and by another dose of Hospital Humour. This doctor said Australia could well no longer be there to return to when I got better since the Aborigines were planning to re-claim the entire continent. How did he know this? The stitches were black to contrast with the turquoise liquid. So where did I go to get them out? “Mais n’importe où! Chez le boucher, si vous voulez.” (‘It doesn’t matter. The butcher’s if you like.’)

Being whisked to different sections of the hospital with no warning or explanation suited me. Otherwise I could not have gone through with some of the ‘tests’. We were in a queue. I was next on the bench. The skilful woman plunged something terribly sharp into my back and I was in agony. “I am glad you didn’t warn me.” “Yes, it’s better this way, no anaesthetic, just a brief moment of pain.” Hôpital Saint Louis still had its living link with the Middle Ages. “How long were you ill before being diagnosed?” she asked. “Years,” I said. “It is unbelievable how much time is lost because people are slow to realize something is wrong.” I could not afford to think of my time in Paris as lost time, a gradual spiralling down. I was so ill I felt lucky to have been diagnosed at all.
There was a blissful aspect to my newly diagnosed illness. I would wake up from sleep to find a nurse standing at the end of my bed. I was no longer alone. Friends came from the Cité U and sat at the end of the bed and wished me well. The Kobylanskys came in shifts. They looked a long way away and I quickly got tired just focussing on their presence. I felt as though my body was laid out in a dark church. I was taking a break from life and experiencing darkness and silence and remoteness. Being very ill had distinct advantages over being ‘well’.

Catherine visited with her new Czech painter friend, Boris (Borr-ees). He had straight, silver hair and wore a flamboyant dark overcoat and a medallion around his neck. He looked very Wagnerian. “But, Sonia, you are not at all as Catherine described you. You are gentle and almost Rubenesque. And you are just made to be a wife and a mother. Are you sure you can take no short cut to your man?” It was an image which belonged to that moment, of fertility, much promise, and of fulfilment, and that image helped to pull me through the months of chemotherapy that I now faced.

I graduated from in-patient to out-patient and took the metro from the Cité U on the southern edge of Paris to Hôpital Saint Louis in the north. I would get off at metro Jean Jaurès and walk along the canal Saint Martin to the hospital. The canal gave a real nineteenth century and slightly Amsterdam feel to the quartier, and after submitting to the nauseating intravenous dose of chemotherapy, I would distract myself by exploring the area, the thought of being cured carrying me along. It was here that I bought myself a dress - the first pretty dress that I had bought myself in Paris. I had just come out of an interview with professor Jacquillat and his ‘team’. Though I was feeling very weak and far from well, they were pleased with the results of x-rays and blood tests and concluded that ‘scientifically’ I was on track. Instinctively, to redress the balance of the over-scientific approach to me and my disease, I went into one
of the fashion warehouses behind the hospital and tried on a green floral dress which would have looked at home in Botticelli's 'Primavera'. As I paid for it, the woman said, ‘Vous avez de la chance. C’est du Liberté de Londres.’ (‘You are lucky. It’s a Liberty print from London.’)

There it was, my Paris dress with its English print. I compromised and called it my ‘Jacquillat dress’. This dress was the closest I came to embodying the spirit of the young tree outside Victorino’s window.

The chemotherapy sessions were tough. I sensed that if my illness had been any more serious, that my body would have been unable to survive the drugs which saved my life. They were doing their own damage. I was also given medication to take from day to day. It took me a long time to link my daily hallucinations with these drugs. Instead, I thought that some madness which I must have been suppressing for a long time had finally risen to the surface, and I worked very hard to keep this disturbing occurrence to myself. The strange aspect of the illness was that I continued with my student life even while coping with chemotherapy. The darkest moments had been before the diagnosis. Now my life made more sense and this clarity gave me more energy and hope.

During the Easter break I was able to go and stay with Baba again. Baba dealt with the spiritual side of things. There were her daily prayers for my health and in particular I asked her to pray to Saint Panteleimon who cured everything. I was on the lookout for a total release from all suffering. Worth a try. Baba would return from the church with containers of holy water supposedly from Jordan (which I drank), and we would sit down to very nutritious meals of Baba’s home-made soup which she always called ‘schöne Suppe’, complete with Russian black bread and the kind of camembert we really liked, which was so old that it was sold off cheap at the market. Only the French would have recognised it as cheese at all.
I often mentioned Alvaro’s name at these lunches and Baba was quick to pick up how important he was as a friend. In her overly-detached way she said, “So before it was Italy, now it’s Spain.” I did not mention Victorino. Our meal would end with Russian tea taken with lemon and honey and plenty of ‘wise’ discussion about family and friends (I always felt that Baba was harder on me than on herself), and generous sprinklings of words from ‘American’ (Amerikansky), German, Spanish, Italian and Russian to keep us both laughing.

Baba loved to sing and she taught me ‘Happy Birthday’ in Russian. It seemed that Russians, traditionally living to a very old age, became very adept at wishing each other a long life. I was not altogether happy to think that, in spite of illness, a long life might be my fate too.

Then there were half-remembered songs from Baba’s days in Philadelphia when she arrived there from Russia in 1915. Her ‘American’ was charming, her humour delightful. She sang to me about how ‘M-O-T-H-E-R’ spells ‘mother’ and how you’ll never have another. There was a harmonic duet which we sang together in American:

“Smile a while
You kissed me, said ‘adieu’ “

and ‘adieu’ was pronounced ‘a-dew’.

I never ceased to be entranced by Baba’s ability to move along with the flow of life, taking her past with her, not as a burden, but as a companion.

I treasured this brief period at rue Lecourbe, and it would be my last. Surrounded by a kind of living family history, pot plants, family photos and the photo of Nicholas Berdyaev, the icons, the books in Russian, and the silence and slow time that only Baba’s presence could give.

Here I read Doctor Zhivago, in French, sitting on the sagging bed. It was strange that my life should be so rich at this time. I came
to the pages in the novel where Zhivago was with a woman who was fighting for her life. “Death is hanging over me . . . Say something to me . . . Set my mind at rest,” she said to the young doctor. Zhivago’s answer helped me too because he gives her a winning image of herself: “And now look. You in others are yourself, your soul. This is what you are . . . You have always been in others and you will remain in others.” We all need a Doctor Zhivago at times like this. I had felt unrecognisable in my illness and blocked off from life. To think now that the best part of me was not damaged by the illness was very reassuring. I returned to the book. He tells the woman to go to sleep and puts his hand on her forehead. The next day she is better.

I got back to the Cité U, and to Claude Simon. However, some spring afternoons were so warm, that instead of going back into the library, I sat in the Jardin de Luxembourg which was nearby and drank in Paris around me as I turned over the pages of what I called ‘friendly’ books. The friend who had given me the book was more important than the book itself. By reading I felt that I was joining Mandy and Geoff in leading life as an artist. I became very caught up in Hemingway’s winter holidays in the Austrian Tyrol (as described in A Moveable Feast). His long walks in in the crisp snow made me yearn for a more outdoor life. I visualised myself, strong, healthy and hearty, breathing in the icy air and crunching through the snow. I was very ill and my mind reached out to these images powerfully and instinctively.

Or I would just sit and dream about my recent memories. What would I take away with me from Paris? I knew now that I would not stay. The link with Victorino was still quite strong. I hardly saw him now or spoke to him as I used to. Amparo came to Paris more and more frequently. Victorino looked happy and I always wished him well.

As spring turned into leafy green summer I was given a break
from the distressing chemotherapy. It would have been nice to think that my disease was a winter disease and that I could spend the summer sitting on the very green grass of the Cité U among the daisies, in the gentle European sun, and emerge untraumatized from my illness. But this was not to be.

Mandy was returning to England for the summer. She invited me to come too but I was not well enough to accept and I had no energy for regrets. Our friendship was brief, outstanding, memorable and complete. I have never looked back and felt that it was not fully lived. It was. Then I was told at the hospital that my treatment would need to continue for longer than had been first expected. The chemotherapy alone was not enough, I would need radiotherapy as well. Recovery would be a matter of years and not months.

“It’s like a place I don’t really know,” I said to Mandy as we had one of our talks in what was now her ‘belvedere’. She was surrounded by photos, glue, paint, easels, and she sat with her feet on the rung of the chair. She looked like someone who would have been comfortable anywhere. I was groping my way to a place where I might feel comfortable too.

“I don’t believe in undiscovered country, as you know, Alex,” she said using that magical phrase of hers. Her words opened a door for me: I would not be returning home, I would be arriving there for the first time. I would not be returning to the past, I would be starting again.

To return to health on the fertile east coast of Australia now looked like a stroke of luck. Fate was going to be kinder and to provide the very best home for me. As the strong Australian sun flooded into my mind, the summer park of the Cité U looked shabby and sad. Victorino and Alvaro began to look very Spanish. I and all the people I had come to know in Paris began to look like individuals with very separate destinies. What had appeared to be together now fell apart. My life in Paris now revealed itself as an ending, the
conclusion of everything which had come before, and not the beginning which I had imagined when I first arrived. “Australia,” said Alvaro, “now I think I would like Australia. We won’t be all that distant, you and me, on opposite sides of the world we might still be leading parallel lives.” I was surprised and touched by this parting comment of his. I did not say good-bye to Victorino. It would have been meaningless and sad. I had said good-bye to him a summer ago - sometimes my instinct for the right time was perfect.

The work on Claude Simon was still far from finished. “Finish it” were Marcelle Kobylansky's strict words on the matter. I thought how I could pack it all up, along with a few essential references which I had bought, in a large trunk. This trunk would arrive in Sydney a few months after me. During this time doctors in Sydney would discover that I was iller again than even Professor Jacquillat could have known, so that completing the thesis would be absurd and irrelevant. This was my wish. In fact, I did finish it in Sydney and posted it back to Madame Moatti, who was surprised at how professional it was. There was a different kind of packing happening in my mind. I could only take with me what would make me better. My illness knew better than me what I needed. I jettisoned so much. Victorino’s charisma came with me, but, surprisingly, it was Mandy who really came with me: she had given me a way of living. So, it was a woman and not a man who I took back in my mind to Sydney with me.

I was so ill that leaving Paris was not a wrench, simply the next step in the treatment. I was already separated by illness from my Paris life. I booked my Qantas ticket back to Sydney knowing that the illness, not me, was in charge. I could not be emotional. And Baba and I would have to be linked again as we had been before I came to Paris: by our spiritual affinity.

* * * *
I am still admiring views and rooftops but this time it is the rooftops of Paddington which have more colour and light than the rooftops of Paris, and this time with no plans in mind. The future is a blank. I cannot forget that I am in Sydney. There are palm trees. It is 5a.m. The woman in the bed next to mine lives in one of those terraces. She watches as her son leaves for work. A much older woman, Xanita, opposite, is speaking to her neighbour: “I am thinking there is no hope,” she says. One of the beds in the ward is empty. Someone died during the night.

The view dominates the ward.

I can get out of my bed and join some of the patients in a room on the same floor which has a telephone. I meet a woman with skin cancer all over her face. She is smoking and she is in tears. “I got the results.” Numbly by my own illness, I cannot react. “You will be okay,” she says, “You are young and I can see from your face that you will get better”.

I get back to my bed exhausted by this social ‘outing’. Removed now from Paris I can think differently, but I am afraid to think. I had obviously been ill for a long time before I had been diagnosed. Even before leaving Sydney for Paris. The illness has directed my life. The perspective is clear and painful. All my relationships have been weighed down by the lack of normal health and the enthusiasm and vitality and resilience that go with it. Surely then I should be amazed at how I had made the most of my time in Paris. Victorino's presence in my life was not so hard to understand now: he was someone one could be close to over a distance. My body had told me that this was all I could cope with.

I do go on to get remarkably better, though after such a major illness one is never quite what one would have been without it. The
present looks so difficult, but hopeful. It will take me years to recover from the chemotherapy.

“I am glad you are back where you belong, Sonia,” writes Baba, “among all those eucalypts which will make you so much better.”

But belonging is not instant, it is a process. Mandy’s gift to me of ‘life as an artist’ allows me to begin this process confidently and optimistically. Paris for me now became associated with the illness. I had no desire to go back there or even to think about my time there.

* * *

And to finish, I say simply this: that years later, my health broke down again, the aftermath of the radiotherapy, and this second time I found I had less strength and optimism to fight back with. Handing myself over to a sense of inevitability, I got out my ‘Paris diaries’ in their French exercise books, opened them, and began to face the past.

* * * *
EPILOGUE

Baba: died at the age of 89 and was buried at Sainte Geneviève des Bois.

Catherine Kobylansky: went on to have several successful exhibitions in Paris.

Anne Kobylansky: a year after I returned to Sydney, Anne was killed by a passing car while she rode her bike during a holiday in the south of France.

André Kobylansky: hanged himself in his study a year after Anne’s death.

Alvaro Monzon: lives in a seventeenth century farmhouse in the north of Spain with his wife who is also a psychiatrist.

Victorino: eight years after I last saw him, he almost drowned while on holiday. In Alvaro’s words, “He is no longer the same, you know, he has become very silent and solitary.”

Mandy: I lost touch with her, and yet, in a sense, I never have.
I am a student in Paris. This is a once in a lifetime and privileged opportunity. And yet, as I respond to the people I meet, and experience what happens, I am unaware of what the end of the book will reveal: that I have a life-threatening illness.

I have based the account on diaries which I kept at the time, from 1976 to 1978.

By staying true to the original experiences, my book relives the feelings at the time, of feeling alone, but of being very open, and at the same time of not being surprised by much of what happened.

The book is divided into six sections:

1. PARIS

SECTION 1 is about the toughness of being new to a place. I am only partly new, however, since I have a Russian grandmother in Paris and I stay with her. The Russian connection of this first year is colourful and interesting.

2. STRASBOURG

SECTION 2 takes place in Strasbourg where I attend a German language summer school. This section is an unexpected and happy contrast to Section 1 since I meet and make friends with some Australian students.
3-4. CITE UNIVERSITAIRE

SECTIONS 3 and 4 are the most interesting sections, describing my encounter with the Cité Universitaire in Paris, and its many overseas students. The friendships though are mostly very superficial. These sections are about transient student experiences, living in-transit if you like. There is a Spanish student, Victorino, whom I am very struck by, and he, and his friend, Alvaro, are the most continuous ‘relationships’ in an otherwise fragmented existence. I am aware that my life is very unsatisfactory but feel that I have no choice but to accept it.

5. BAGNERES-DE-BIGORRE

SECTION 5 is another language summer school. This time I am overtired, not so well, and longing for a break from Paris. I choose to go to the Pyrénées mountains in the south of France to a Russian language course. But I return to Paris still unwell. The mountain air has not cured me.

6. PARIS AGAIN

SECTION 6 is the final section. It records the unexpected happiness of meeting an inspiring English art student, Mandy, at the Cité Universitaire. Also, unexpectedly, my diagnosis with the life-threatening Hodgkin’s disease and the time I spent in St Louis Hospital in Paris before deciding to come back to Australia for further treatment at St Vincent’s Hospital in Sydney.

In retrospect, realising that I have been struggling to live the life of a (carefree) student while ill, clarifies the whole of my time in Paris. Thus the story resolves itself.
About the Author

Alexandra (Sonia) Pianoff was born in London in 1954. Her father was Alexei Pianoff, a Russian/French engineer, and her mother was Enid Rogers, then a recent arts graduate of Sydney University. They had met on a train in the south of France and soon married. Alex grew up with her mother, younger sister and father, later stepfather. She lived in various continents - Buenos Aires at one time, rural New Zealand another - she specially liked two periods at Coombe Springs, a Gurdjieff community near London. It was an upbringing in many ways mind-expanding but the incessant changes of place were stressful. The family eventually settled in Sydney.

Her most successful period at school, in most ways her best time ever, were the last years when she attended North Sydney Girls High School. She proved to be very skilled in languages and literature. She always enjoyed a language-based joke, for example - a typical one she liked was the sign in the psychiatrist's waiting room, “Denial is not a river in Egypt.” But she was also very talented in ballet, and spent many intensive hours training in Miss Tweedie’s studio. She often said when fighting difficult times later, “The ballet training got me through.” After the School Certificate she left to join the ballet, but soon decided that ballet people were not interesting enough and returned to school. She rejoined her old class, and considering that she had to catch up on some months’ work, it was remarkable that she achieved second place in the State in English in the HSC.

She then did an Arts degree at Sydney University, eventually gaining first class honours in French. It was mostly not a happy time, for reasons not then clear but probably due to the onset of the Hodgkins disease that was diagnosed later; there was also her mother's second divorce and serious illness. She did however enjoy a period in Women’s College and made some good friends there.

Following graduation she won a scholarship for a masters degree
(maîtrise ès lettres) in literature at the Sorbonne. She lived for some of the time in Paris with her Ukrainian grandmother (‘Baba’) and learned a great deal from her. But it became clear she was very ill and eventually the Hodgkins disease was diagnosed. It had only recently become curable and the severe radiotherapy caused problems years later.

Back in Sydney she enjoyed quite good health for a few years. She completed the thesis, and was largely responsible for choosing a lovely house among trees in Lane Cove where she and her mother moved. She lived there almost all the rest of her life and its calm atmosphere with an interior arranged as she wished proved always helpful to her health.

By that time many disturbing things had happened over a long period; she undertook an intensive psychoanalysis through the 1980s, which was a major effort on top of her work as a teacher with the Adult Migrant Education Service. Her teaching style involved a lot of personal interaction, which made the teaching great but required high levels of energy. She produced a published report on ‘English for nurses’, which combined her language skills with her unwished-for experience of the medical world. Besides that she gained a part-time degree in psychology at Macquarie University. Among the courses she was particularly interested in cohort studies, which deals with the how the people born at the same time go through life stages in similar ways, but in a different way from those born at other times. She was impressed with the lecturer’s opening comment, “Have you noticed how people 10 years older than you seem to go through life in a fog?” One cohort in which she took a great interest were the “Bicentennial babies”, as she called them - the children of her friends who were born around 1988.

She married James Franklin, then a tutor in mathematics at the University of New South Wales, in 1985.

From about 1991 her health worsened and she was no longer
able to do paid work. In that year she had a visit from her father, which went well and was a major event. She decided to become a Catholic and joined the Lane Cove parish through the RCIA program (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults). Though she had little interest in ritual or doctrine, her faith remained a basic orientation. With time now spent at home, she also wrote a book about her time in Paris based on her diaries from that time, but did not make serious attempts to have it published.

Around 1993 she was diagnosed with scleroderma, a largely untreatable auto-immune condition that gradually weakened her. She worked very hard with exercise and diet and was able to lead a reasonably enjoyable and productive life. She also read - a particular favourite was Virginia Woolf's diaries, which describe the restricted life someone intelligent and very interested in people who is forced to stay at home calmly to deal with health problems. Classical music around the house was important: mostly she had 2MBS-FM on. She found it hard to keep in contact with friends as she could be stressed by unannounced visits or phone calls, but much appreciated letters, cards and photos of friends’ children.

A tortoiseshell cat arrived in 1996. The two had a mutually adoring relationship. Alex carefully trained the cat to have high self-esteem.

At the beginning of 2008 she insisted on doing the work of choosing a nursing home for her mother and taking her there. Her breathing and swallowing especially were badly affected by the disease but she single-mindedly kept to her routine of exercise, shopping, cooking and washing up to a week before her death. In October 2008, she died after a few days in Royal North Shore Hospital, where she stayed to the last moment optimistic and interested in the people around her.

James Franklin
http://www.maths.unsw.edu.au/~jim
Alex Pianoff at Fox St, Lane Cove, c. 1985