

Paris Night

Fall, 2016

Last fall I was staying in Paris, again, in an apartment in the shadow of Sacre Coeur, overlooking the iconic *Rue Chappe* steps. My host, Cara, an actor/writer, held a soiree during my stay at which I met various people with unusual lives. I helped Cara with the grocery shopping, selected the wine, played man-Friday for the chefs and, as it turned out, took the event photos because her photographer (with whom we had lunch earlier in the week) couldn't make the gig.

After the event, I left Montmartre and metro-ed down to the Left Bank to stay with Marie, a Sorbonne PhD researcher, and her thirteen-year-old son. With the boy off to school, Marie, in her bathrobe and stringy hair, would join me in the little kitchenette for breakfast. She took tea from a bowl to breath the steam and feel the warmth on her face and her hands. She would stand and sort of hold court as she described the French *Basoche* and its link to medieval theater.

I set out one morning to locate the café on *Rue du Bac* where two expat American women determined to do an authentic re-translation¹ of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and launched the project with a toast to the semi-colon. This bible of modern feminism was first translated into English in 1953 by an American, male, zoologist who, of course, didn't quite get it and didn't like her semi-colons. Actually, that isn't quite fair. Though lacking background in philosophy and French literature, and more pertinent, lacking a second X chromosome, he worked very hard to understand the Other and Beauvoir resignedly approved the edition.² He died the year his translation was published.

I then contacted a business consultant, Deborah, that I had met at Cara's soiree, and asked if she would like to join me in my own toast to Beauvoir's semi-colon – *vive le point-virgule!* She initially suggested we start by meeting at her favorite fountain, but I countered with the café location.³ We agreed on a time, and when I arrived, she was already there. This was noteworthy because I am usually "waitin' on the lady." She was seated at

¹ Beauvoir, Simone de (2009) [1949]. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Random House: Alfred A. Knopf. ISBN 978-0-307-26556-2.

² Part of this sentence is a borrowing from the translators' introduction.

³ Café Le Buisson d'Argent, 25 Rue du Bac.

the bar, a little askew, her back to the window, in colloquy with the bartender. I ordered Kir Royale for the toast, after which she guided me to a nearby bistro⁴ for dinner.

The walk was pleasant and the conversation spirited. I initially walked gallantly on her street side, but she asked that I stay on the side where her hearing was better, having lost some in a recent accident. We paused to examine a fur trimmed umbrella in the window of a parasol shop.⁵ A powerful, socially confident expat, Deborah accosted virtually every male we encountered leaving me to charm his spouse or date. During dinner, and of course more wine, we engaged adjacent patrons and later visited with the owners as they closed for the night. I suggested we find the fountain she had mentioned earlier.

Upon arrival at *Fontaine des Quatre-Saisons*,⁶ I took her in Ann Landers hold,⁷ close enough to know she is a woman but not too close to forget she is a lady, and hummed Al Green as we danced a simple, but tastefully intimate, box step around the square. We were interrupted by a gear-laden bicyclist who spoke with Deborah in French for some time. She gave him a donation of twenty euros and exchanged contact information. It was 3:00 a.m. and we realized the Metro had been closed for an hour. Ah, but I had Uber! In a few minutes, we were at her apartment.

I was encouraged to crash there, and she provided linens, a comfortable sofa-bed and a toothbrush. Together for coffee later in the morning, I greeted her college-student daughter with a friendly, “*Bonjour*.” Her response was a crisp, “I’m not French.” Cute kid.

After a theatrical “just walk away, and don’t look back,” I made my way to Marie’s apartment with a spring in my step and thinking no collateral damage. Actually, the spring in my step is a bit of a metaphor as I did have a fairly serious hitch in my gitalong at the time. The hip has since been replaced.

Mark Goodall

⁴ Chez Fernand, at 13 Rue Guisarde.

⁵ Alexandra Sojfer, 218 Boulevard Saint-Germain.

⁶ 57 Rue de Grenelle.

⁷ I discovered this approach to a proper dance hold in an “Ann Landers” advice column when I was but a child.