

The Cigar

Café Cassette,¹ Paris, Wednesday, October 5, 2016

I was seated, staging of course, at an outdoor table on the left bank at Café Cassette near Marie's apartment, just north of *Le Jardin du Luxembourg*. I was reading a novelization of the life of Violette Morris by Francine Prose² with a highlighter. My satchel was on the empty chair and a tin of small Belgian cigars was on the table with a box of matches and my cell phone. I was wearing an aged but smart fedora. The book served the dual purpose of being a prop as well as a good read.

I was into a passage set in occupied Paris describing riders on the Metro staring at a German soldier smoking a cigarette and arrogantly returning their stares. I was interrupted by a pair of young women seating themselves at the table next. We exchanged polite *bonjours*. They appeared college age but more sophisticated in dress and demeanor, perhaps trying to pass for Parisienne. Had I been much younger, I would have been more affable. As it was, I decided to remain aloof and await a discreet opportunity before engaging in conversation.

The young woman facing me, with dark, straight, long hair and a black, snap closure, wool moto jacket, unobtrusively took inventory of my table top then asked about the tin of cigars. I offered her one and suggested her companion, using my phone, photograph my lighting it for her. They seemed to understand.

This request grew out of an incident that occurred one night in Paris a few years ago. It was a Casablanca noir evening, misty, shop lights reflecting from the wet pavement. My then wife was buying souvenirs while I became lost in a quiet mood of disengagement across the street. A woman in a knee length coat, and comfortable in a hat, approached, extending half of something hand rolled for me to light. I fumbled with a little box of wooden matches, getting the third one to stay lit as she steadied my hands. With a sweet *merci* followed by a quick *bonsoir*, she walked on, looking back once.

The transaction here was executed smoothly, thanks to a reliable match, then conversation ensued about my book. The two were most interested in

¹ 73 rue de Rennes

² 2014: *Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932*, Harper (ISBN 978-0-06-171378-1)

Violette, “the hyena of the gestapo,” who had undergone a double mastectomy in order to fit more comfortably into the cockpit of tiny, dangerous, open wheel racers – or was it to coordinate better with the cut of a man’s suit and the line of the tie. After a bit, I resumed my reading and the young ladies returned to contemporary conversation. At one point, the brunette put the half-smoked cigar to her lips and, realizing there was no life, absently returned it to the ashtray.

After paying the check, gathering their things, and bidding me a polite *au revoir*, the cigar smoker turned back. She carefully picked the stub from the ashtray and, pausing as she caught my eyes, offered it to me in a courteous gesture laced with a transient intimacy.

Mark Goodall