

## Le Voyeur

by Lucy Sieger

Once, I stayed in Paris for a magical month, renting a fifth-floor walk-up apartment on Rue Bonaparte. From my window, to the right, loomed the weathered abbey spire of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and the towers of Saint Sulpice just beyond. The jumbled rooftops of the fabled Parisian skyline tumbled before me, random yet artfully arranged. The buildings were old in this part of Paris, eighteenth century, never subjected to Haussmannian demolitions. In the evenings, a lubricious moon bathed the city in its sensual light, and twice, rainbows held Paris in their colorful embrace, bisecting the pearly sky. This neighborhood was the iconic, postcard Paris, legendary streets wispy with ghosts of de Beauvoir, Sartre, Hemingway, Franklin, Picasso.

But my most treasured Paris tableau was not found in any guide book. It was the apartment across the street, an exquisite residence one floor down from my sunny aerie. Peering discreetly from my darkened fifth floor window gave me a prime view into the living and dining rooms, into small vignettes of ordinary, if wealthy, Parisian family life.

The couple entertained constantly, and I caught glimpses of the bottom halves of guests, all clad in black, hands raising and lowering cigarettes and drinks. Sometimes, after a party, two white cats sprawled among the dirty dishes on the dining room table.

On quieter evenings, a man would sit at the desk in front of the living room window, transfixed by his laptop. He was craggy and handsome in that French way, like Dominique de Villepin, the former French prime minister who was also a poet, and the computer monitor tinted his fine features a soft blue. In the mornings, I'd see an attractive woman with tousled bangs, clad in a white bathrobe, perch with her coffee and cigarette, tapping out a text on her phone. The steam from her cup mingled with smoke from her cigarette, or was that my imagination on auto-correct? Later on, one or both of the cats would sometimes stretch across the desk and sunbathe.

I felt like a voyeur, although my motivations were not prurient. I was obsessed with France, with Paris, for a way of life that was similar to ours yet different, with a culture that treasured its philosophers and bookstores and embraced many modes – and many ages – of beauty. I'm far from alone in my obsession – Paris is the most visited city in the world. But if there were ever a scientific study of women who were castigated in youth for being too tall, too strong featured, too smart, *too much*, I'd bet we are overrepresented amongst Francophiles.

Voyeurism aside, I spent much of my time out of the apartment, walking the Seine, hanging out in cafes, taking writing and cooking classes, attending wine tastings, and meeting up with new friends. But while home, I would indulge – and what is Paris if not a city of indulgences? – in small surreptitious moments, perhaps five minutes at a time, watching “my” family.

My inquisitive tendencies were validated by a photography book, *Paris Views*, by Gail Albert Halaban, which captures slices of life both urbane and mundane, framed by the windows of Parisian apartments. It's not as salacious as it sounds, for the scenes are staged, just as they were for a similar volume set in New York. In both cities, she found participants through friends of friends and social media, people who were willing to feign unawareness that they were being observed. She discovered more resistance in France, which, despite its licentious reputation, is a fiercely private culture. But still, she filled a glorious coffee table tome with stunning, intimate and occasionally sensual tableau.

We see a middle-aged woman toweling herself off, a row of rubber ducks sitting on the shower ledge. A young Parisienne with a classic French bob opens a can of Campbell's soup for her dinner. Another woman, wrapped in a red bathrobe, sits on her bed, leaving us to guess what she is pondering.

These private moments stood in stark contrast to my own Rue Bonaparte family. Only their living and dining rooms were exposed to me – not their kitchen or bathroom or bedrooms. These were public rooms, although I doubt the family knew just how public. The French are formal, and the personas they presented in their front rooms adhered to a certain decorum. But one time, I saw the bottom halves of the couple stretched out on their living room sofa, watching TV. It was the only vignette that made me turn away.

Two hundred years ago, Napoleon said, "A woman, in order to know what is her due and what her power is, must live in Paris for six months." I only stayed one month so of course was left wanting. But for that brief period, I was an anthropologist, scrutinizing differences between our two cultures, even if it meant peering through someone else's windows. It was a Gallic scavenger hunt, a search for that missing piece of myself that can only be found in France – a tall order for one short month. Napoleon's truth has not diminished with time.

On my last day at Rue Bonaparte, while packing, I instinctively paused to glance across the way. It was later in the morning, my family long dispersed into the crooked streets and grand boulevards of Paris. I could feel the languorous quiet of their apartment, lifeless except for one white cat perched on the desk. Not napping, not stretching, but sitting, serene as a yogi. For the first time, he stared straight up at me, unblinking in the morning sun, his belated acknowledgement my bittersweet farewell.

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