Before *Eat, Pray, Love* there was *Almost French*

The story of an Australian woman’s impetuous heart and finding love in a magical city

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For Mum and Dad

Et, bien sûr, pour Fred
Prologue

I left Australia hoping to cram a lifetime of adventures into one unforgettable year. Instead, I ended up with a new life. I’d taken one year’s leave from my job as a television reporter with SBS in Sydney to travel around Europe. If I didn’t go now, I never would, warned a nagging voice in my head. Though, at twenty-seven I wasn’t much interested in hanging around youth hostels. The idea was to immerse myself in fascinating foreign cultures, to work as a freelance journalist in Eastern Europe, which in my mind bubbled with unwritten, hard-hitting stories.

It was in Bucharest, Romania, that I met Frédéric. His English was sprinkled with wonderful expressions like ‘foot fingers’ instead of toes and he seemed charming, creative and complicated—very French, in other words. When he’d invited me to visit him in Paris, I’d hesitated just long enough to make sure he was serious before saying yes. Why not? After all, this is what travelling is all about, isn’t it: seizing opportunities, doing things you wouldn’t normally do, being open to the accidental?

That trip to Paris was almost eight years ago now. And except for four months when I resumed my travels, I have been living here ever since.

It was a city and culture I was familiar with—at least that’s
what I thought back then. As a child my family had toured France in a tiny campervan and my eyes had popped at the chocolates and the cheeses. At secondary school I studied French and saw a few films by Truffaut and Resnais which had struck me as enigmatic and European, although I couldn’t have said why. When I was sixteen we lived in England for a year and I came to Paris several times. In my mind, these experiences added up to knowledge of France and some understanding of its people. Then, a little over ten years later, my meeting with Frédéric drew me back, and when the time came to actually live in Paris, I figured belonging and integrating would take merely a matter of months.

Now, remembering my early naiveté draws a wry smile. The truth is, nearly all my preconceptions of France turned out to be false. It hardly needs to be said that living in a place is totally different from visiting it. And yet this blatantly obvious statement does need to be said, particularly about Paris, the most visited city in the world. A place I imagined to know after a few nights in a closet-sized hotel room as a teenager and one summer holiday with a Frenchman sipping kir on café terraces.

At times the learning curve has seemed almost vertical. The social code I discovered in France wasn’t just different from my Australian one, it was diametrically opposed to it. For a long time, I couldn’t fathom the French and, to be fair, they couldn’t fathom me either. My clothes, my smile—even how much I drank—set me apart. During my first year, dinner parties turned into tearful trials. There I was, a confident twenty-eight-year-old with the confidence knocked out of me, spending cheese courses locked in somebody’s loo, mascara streaming down my cheeks.

It hasn’t all been tears and trials, of course. The truth is, if
France failed to live up to some of my expectations, in other ways the reality has been far richer, a thousand times better than my clichéd visions. My work as a journalist has enabled me to meet people ranging from famous French fashion designers to master chefs. On a personal level I'd taken a headlong plunge into new territory as well. Put a very French Frenchman together with a strong-willed Sydney girl (who is actually far more Australian than she’d ever realised), and the result is some fairly spectacular—and sometimes hilarious—cultural clashes.

If I had to pick one word to sum up my life in France, it'd have to be ‘adventure’. Every moment has been vivid, intensely felt. No doubt many people who live in a foreign country would say the same thing. But there is, I think, something that sets this country apart from many other parts of the world. I know of no other place that is so fascinating, yet so frustrating. France is like a maddening, moody lover who inspires emotional highs and lows. One minute it fills you with a rush of passion, the next you’re full of fury, itching to smack the mouth of some sneering shopkeeper or smug civil servant. Yes, it’s a love–hate relationship. But it’s charged with so much mystery, longing and that French speciality—séduction—that we can’t resist coming back for more.

From where I write in Paris today, I see a foil shimmer of rooftops, a few orange chimney pots, quaintly crooked windows and lots of sky. Although by this city’s standards it’s nothing special, to me it is precious, this view. It makes me think back to a time when we didn’t have it, when we were living in a different apartment where I wasn’t nearly as happy. Those early difficult years in France seem a lifetime ago now, as though they were lived by someone else. So much has changed since then, including me, probably. The
truth is, when I started to write this book I had trouble taking myself back to that time. I don't know why it should have been so difficult. Either I'd forgotten or subconsciously didn't want to remember or, being a journalist, I was paralysed by the idea of writing in the first person. Probably a combination of all three.

For days and weeks, I sat staring at my rectangle of pearl-grey sky. For inspiration I looked at old photos, read my early articles and Mum sent me all the letters I'd written from France, which she'd carefully kept. The memories came back gradually, growing sharper and brighter until I could see myself on that summer's day almost eight years ago, excited but nervous, arriving in Paris in my safari shorts and flat, clumpy sandals, oblivious to the horror my outfit would inspire in any self-respecting Frenchman.

And suddenly it seemed as though it happened only yesterday.
One

This isn’t like me.

The queue for passport inspection at Charles de Gaulle airport surges impatiently. My flight from Romania has coincided with one arriving from Mali and I curse the rotten timing because at this rate it’ll take all day. The French police scrutinise the passports from Eastern Europe and Africa, ask lots of questions. The queue isn’t really a line but a claustrophobic knot and I am somewhere in the middle of it, surrounded by women in bright headscarves and cumbersome robes, and tall, athletic men. Their blue-black faces shine: it’s hot and stuffy. More passengers pour from planes and we squash together tighter and tighter, our clothes and skins sticking together.

I’m not the sort of girl who crosses continents to meet up with a man she hardly knows.

I’d intended to give the passport officer a piece of my mind when it was my turn at the window—a few helpful suggestions. Like, how about concentrating on the task at hand instead of idly chatting with your colleagues? And haven’t the French ever heard of those rope railings which arrange
queues in neat snake configurations? But he stamps my passport with barely a glance, smiling charmingly as he says, ‘Bonne journée, Mademoiselle,’ and after all that waiting suddenly I’m through the bottleneck and officially in France.

Paris hadn’t even been part of my travel plan.

I’m in a space ship. Terminal One is a galactic sphere traversed by transparent tubes which are speeding people in different directions. I take one going up. The impression of breathtaking modernity is dashed by the general rundown appearance of the place. If this is a space ship, it’s a pretty outdated model. At the top, luggage is being spat onto a conveyer belt which keeps stopping and starting. After another interminably long wait, my tattered blue backpack tumbles out.

Yet here I am, coming to see—no, stay with—a Frenchman with whom I have conversed for a grand total of, oh, maybe forty-five minutes.

Glass doors slide open. I push the luggage trolley down the ramp into the arrivals lounge. I wonder if I’ll recognise him straightaway. A couple of months have passed since we met. But to my surprise, there’s no-one in the crowd who even remotely resembles my mental snapshot. I steer the trolley over to an exposed seat near the glass exit, apprehension squeezing my chest.

This is mad.

The doubts had started festering after a series of bad phone calls, gnawing at my excitement until I’d almost forgotten
what had attracted me in the first place: the impression that he was different, unlike any man I’d ever met. The worst was one week ago when he’d called to confirm my arrival time. It had been another awkward telephone conversation punctuated by long pauses and misunderstandings which made me wonder if the problem was deeper than just language. Of course, it doesn’t help that his English is pretty basic and my French is awful. We can’t even communicate, for god’s sake, I’d thought. What are we going to talk about for a whole week? At the end of ten excruciating minutes I’d said goodbye and he’d said, ‘I kiss you,’ which made me cringe. What a sleaze! Had I paid more attention during French classes at school I might have remembered that in France this is the sort of farewell you could say to your sister or grandmother but all I can think now is how weird it sounded.

The air inside Charles de Gaulle airport is stale and smoky. It’s like being in a giant school toilet block after a student smoking session—the chipped white floor tiles are covered in butts. Tired passengers dribble through the sliding doors. I try not to scan the crowd too often. The minutes limp by, my mind relentlessly replaying our two encounters, assessing them from every angle.

He’d been sent to Bucharest for a few days in his job as a lawyer. I was doing some freelance television stories there and had met up with an old friend, Simon, from university who’d moved to Romania for work. On my third day, Simon announced that a couple of French guys from his firm’s Paris office were in town, advising on some privatisation project. Would I like to join them for dinner?

Ten of us had crowded around the table outside the Lebanese restaurant, a favourite haunt of expats in Bucharest. As it turned out, I was next to one of the French guests.
‘I’m Frédéric, from France,’ he’d said politely by way of introduction, and I had to stop myself from saying ‘no kidding’, because there was no mistaking this man’s nationality. Trim sideburns slid down his cheeks. His jumper was slung nonchalantly around his shoulders and he had that perennially tanned look of many Europeans. A faded silk scarf, knotted at the neck, made him look like some nineteenth-century French painter. Over dinner, I noticed the unusual yellowy-brown colour of his eyes; the smooth, manicured hands which made my wrinkled, nail-bitten paws look like something out of science fiction. After we’d finished eating, he lit a pipe, which struck me as hilarious. ‘I didn’t know anyone under a hundred smoked pipes,’ I teased and his face had fallen.

The following night was the Frenchmen’s last evening in Bucharest before returning to Paris. Again we all went out for dinner, this time to an Italian restaurant. They were the last to arrive and they wore their lateness stylishly, circling the long table like suave diplomats, shaking hands with each bloke, kissing the girls on both cheeks. Frédéric seemed to give me a meaningful look or did I just imagine he did? We talked some more. A few personal details emerged, hanging in the air like question marks. Thirty-six and newly single, I learned. I didn’t ask more, didn’t want to appear nosy: interested.

By the time we all ended up at an Irish bar, it was clear the groomed, continental exterior concealed a rather eccentric character—a lawyer who preferred painting even though he’s seriously colour-blind. A slightly absurd sense of humour flashed through his well-brought-up politeness. He told me he loves practical jokes, adores fancy dress parties and making elaborate costumes. ‘Like what?’ I’d asked.
‘Well, one year, we made a New Year’s Eve party, the theme was *esprits de la forêt*, forest spirits, yes. I wanted to do something that looked real but also extraordinary.’ Frédéric told me how he went searching in the woods, where he found a giant, dead tree trunk. It was winter, nature was sodden and the trunk weighed ‘at least one hundred kilos’. When Frédéric and a friend finally got it home in a borrowed truck, he spent four days hollowing it out and trying in vain to dry the inside with a hair dryer. But it remained far too bulky and heavy to shuffle around in the way he’d envisaged so he picked up an old wheelchair from an antique shop. On the night of the party, Frédéric sat on the chair, wrapped in the wet blackness of the hollowed trunk which was still crawling with bugs and spiders.

I laughed, although this didn’t sound like my idea of a great party. ‘Did you enjoy yourself?’

‘Oh yes, it was *terrible*! Everyone thought I was part of the décor, nobody talked to me!’ Frédéric chuckled at the memory and I recall that in French ‘terrible’ means great. ‘It was so *terrible*,’ he repeated, stumbling slightly over the word in his effort to pronounce it in the English way, with a short ‘i’ sound instead of ‘terreeble’.

Chatting, we discovered we share a love of travelling as well as an absentminded habit of turning up to airports minus the required paperwork (tickets, passports, money). But I don’t go anywhere without a guide book, whereas Frédéric’s adventures are amplified by a pathological dislike of planning and preparation. This plays havoc with his life, he’d told me, causing him to run out of petrol on autoroutes, leave his credit cards in automatic teller machines and embark on mountain treks in Kashmir wearing filthy socks on his head and hands in the absence of beanie and gloves.
As we were about to say goodbye Frédéric turned to me, his expression disarmingly earnest all of a sudden. It was then he’d popped the question. Would I like to come to Paris?

Now France wasn’t on my itinerary. The idea of this twelve-month trip was to discover new places, and I’d been to Paris before. After Romania, I was planning to fly to London to try to get some casual work through some television contacts people had given me in Australia. I would stay with my old friend Sue, who’d moved there a year ago. But faced with Frédéric’s invitation, I quickly changed my plans. The truth was I wanted to see him again. We’d both felt the spark, it was obvious. London and work could wait.

‘Well yeah, I’d really like that. I mean, that sounds great.’

As the weeks rolled on in Romania, Paris began to look attractive for reasons other than Frédéric. It’s not that I didn’t enjoy being in Bucharest—in fact I loved it. The city is an absorbing kaleidoscope of sashaying gypsy skirts and stray dogs, proudly cultured people, raffish artists and unreliable lifts. I spent days exploring the cobbled passages of the old Jewish quarter, poking around state-owned art galleries knee-deep in dusty oil paintings. Through Simon I met a great crowd of people. We went out every night, revelling in Romanian red and the freedom which comes from finding new friends far from home, in an out-of-the-way place.

But in Romania, even the simplest of tasks involves hurdling a long line-up of bureaucratic brick walls. My twenty-minute television story on the fight for the restitution of homes and land seized under the communists took almost three months to research and film. And towards the end of the project, the post-communism melancholy of the people started to wear me down. Just around the corner from Simon’s apartment loomed Ceausescu’s monstrous palace—the
biggest building in the world after the Pentagon, apparently. It looked like a Stalinist wedding cake, fitted inside with kilometres of Italian marble and cascading crystal chandeliers. It started to grate, the disparity between this in-your-face waste and the street kids with pleading eyes and skinny, twisted limbs. Many of the Romanians I interviewed seemed resigned, crushed. By the time my television project was wrapped up, I felt ready for a holiday. The Paris invitation winked like a diamond in sunlight, dazzling and indulgent. Yes, London and work could definitely wait.

Thirty minutes. I’ve been waiting thirty minutes!

Still there’s no familiar face among the crowd. I open my Lonely Planet guide to Mediterranean Europe and start reading the history of France summary, feigning nonchalance. In reality, my seize-every-opportunity backpacker’s bravado has all but evaporated. Thoughts swirl around my mind like snowflakes in a blizzard, jumbling irrationality and reason. Ever since the I-kiss-you phone call, I’ve been seriously wondering about the wisdom of coming to Paris. It has started to seem totally imprudent, given how little I know this guy. What if his suave appearance is a front? He could be a psychopath, a serial rapist, how would I know? He’d even admitted he had a problem. There we were on the second evening in Bucharest, casually chatting about the trials of being innately messy, rather forgetful people when Frédéric’s tone had suddenly turned solemn.

‘No, I was awful, really insupportable,’ he’d said. And then his face had brightened—weirdly brightened, I realise in retrospect.

‘I am maniac now,’ he’d told me. They were his exact
words. At the time I’d dismissed it as a language thing. Unsure how to respond, I’d just said, ‘Sounds pretty complicated’, and he’d beamed, as though this was a compliment.

At least Sue will be in Paris in a few days’ time, I comfort myself. She will save me, or, if necessary, report my disappearance (that is, if he ever turns up). One week before my departure, I’d called her in London. At the mature age of twenty-seven, I needed a chaperone. Meet me in Paris next weekend, I’d begged, calculating that’ll only leave me five days alone with the French freak. She’d sounded surprised—the last time we’d spoken I’d been excited. She was having trouble keeping track of my flip-flopping sentiments.

Cries of joy from the arrival gate suddenly startle my train of thought. A family is swarming around a girl—about my age—smothering her with kisses. She’s obviously been backpacking for a while, you can tell by her unkempt appearance. Which reminds me—I’m not exactly looking like model material either. The day before I left Bucharest the city’s water supply had been cut. Apparently the authorities had forewarned the public but, of course, I wouldn’t have understood the announcements even if I had heard them. I haven’t had a shower for forty-eight hours and my hair—which I’d held off washing until the day of my departure—is pulled in a limp ponytail. So much for making a stylish entrance into the world’s glamour capital. But I’d done my best with limited means, putting on a bit of makeup and even ironing my denim shirt. And at least my shorts are clean. I’m also wearing my favourite sandals—flat brown things that reveal my weakness for comfortable, orthopaedic-type shoes. Right now they’re not looking too good, though: my feet and shoes are covered in dust and grime from Bucharest’s streets. It occurs to me my legs could do with a waxing.
In the Lonely Planet guide the history of France is condensed into four and a half action-packed pages. Practically each line announces a world war or a revolution or some tremendous tragedy. I get to ‘De Gaulle’, struggling to concentrate. My eyes flicker involuntarily to my watch.

**FORTY-FIVE MINUTES!**

The anger that had been mounting in me over his tardiness abruptly dissolves. Reality hits me: it’s time to face facts. Frédéric’s obviously had a change of heart. I’ve been stood up. A rush of disappointment engulfs me. Despite my fears about barely knowing him, despite the bad telephone conversations, I realise now how much I’d wanted to see him again. Instead, my romantic Paris rendezvous is over before it’s even begun. Faced with my changed circumstances, I’m thrown off balance, uncertain what to do next, and feeling so pathetic irritates me. The month before arriving in Bucharest I’d travelled through Eastern Europe, learning a new level of self-reliance as I’d grown comfortable with little things like eating out on my own. Breaking through the pain barrier had felt like an accomplishment. And now look at me! Coming undone because of a no-show at the airport.

The reunited family leaves the airport through the glass exit, chatting and laughing, the girl cocooned by parents and siblings. Including my stopovers in Kuala Lumpur and London, it’s been four months since I left Australia. And suddenly I feel lonely—even more lonely than humiliated. I’d like to be with my family. Should have gone straight to see Sue in London instead of changing my plans for a dodgy stranger. Still waiting on a cheque for my Romania story, at this stage I can’t afford to go blowing my savings on expensive...
Paris hotels. Clutching the guide book opened at ‘Places to Stay’, I start fumbling pointlessly with a public telephone that demands a plastic card I don’t have.

‘Er, ’allo.’ The voice behind me is flustered, apologetic. Breathless. Before I’ve even had time to turn around, Frédéric is spewing excuses. His trip to the airport has been besieged by obstacles ranging from traffic jams to a metro strike and being told the wrong arrival terminal by airport information. His face is furrowed with worry. I try to look casual not cross, which doesn’t actually require a lot of effort. He looks just how I remembered him, maybe better. His continental tan has deepened several notches, if that’s possible, enhanced by his smart summer suit which is some colour between grey and light brown.

We head to the lift which goes to the underground carpark, Fréderic dripping style with every step. Suddenly I’m excruciatingly aware of my dishevelled appearance. My stained shirt front where fruit salad juice spilled during the flight. My feet, my clothes, my spiky legs. He looks like he’s just stepped off the set of a French film. And me, how do I look to him, I wonder?

Like an Aussie backpacker in need of a bath, probably.