

Excerpt from
Home Again in Paris: Oscar, Leo & Me

Prologue

I returned to France in the summer of 2006 with my two bichons Oscar and Leo.

The move was unexpected, unplanned. Moving back to France had once seemed unimaginable. After a spell in London I'd moved home to Toronto and was working in newspapers and television. Paris was a part of my past, not my future.

I had first moved to Paris as a fresh-faced graduate student in the mid-1980s, long before the Internet and smartphones. In those days Parisians were still scorning the English language in general and everything American in particular. The French made no distinction between Brits, Americans, Canadians and Australians. As a group, we were referred to, almost anthropologically, as “Anglo-Saxons” – a word I found, and still find, puzzling. It was never used as a term of endearment.

I met many fellow Anglo-Saxons who regarded Parisians as unsmiling, arrogant and rude. I was more indulgent. I was in awe of France's collective narcissism. In France philosophers were treated as celebrities; in America celebrities were treated as philosophers. I was so enamoured of Paris, and so distracted by everything the city offered, it was a miracle I actually completed a doctoral thesis. I had been in no hurry about it. It took me six years. I thought I might stay forever. But I finally left, still infatuated.

After I moved away, everything became focused and purposeful. Paris became the burnished setting of a grainy film I played over and over in my mind, like a dream sequence that keeps repeating. But real time was moving on and my life was fixed in the present. Back in Canada where I'd grown up in a family of British immigrants, I drifted into the backrooms of national politics, then gravitated toward journalism. I landed a newspaper column and, a few years later, was appointed Editor-in-Chief of a daily broadsheet, the *National Post*. I was also co-hosting a television show called *Inside Media*. Happily I had a moral counter-weight to the fragile certitudes of media success. I was married and grounded in deeper reassurances. My wife Rebecca was a lawyer. We were raising a primary school-aged son David from her first marriage. We also had a bichon puppy called Oscar. We lived in a classified 19th century yellow-brick house in a smart address, enjoyed a circle of marvellous friends, received a steady flow of invitations to cocktails and dinner parties, and spent summer afternoons poolside at the Toronto Lawn Tennis Club where I was a solid “B” player.

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Then tragedy struck. Rebecca suddenly fell ill. Doctors diagnosed a rare and virulent form of vascular cancer. Everyone around us was stunned. On her hospital bed, my wife told me she feared that she might live only twelve or eighteen months. Don't be silly, I told her, we were going to fight this together and get through it. She died two weeks later.

My entire world stopped. Everything went silent. Our son David, now ten years old, left for London to live with his father and new family in Muswell Hill. I suddenly found myself alone in our house with Oscar staring sadly at me every morning, confused by the morbid silence that had engulfed our home. I felt so guilty that, a few months later, I adopted another bichon to give Oscar a companion. Leo was already two years old, abandoned by heartless owners who returned him to the breeder like a piece of unwanted merchandise. Leo's cheeky, extraverted energy enlivened the sullen ambience of our house while I slowly emerged from shock and took refuge in depression. Our devoted housekeeper Stella, who I had kept on despite her considerably reduced duties, took care of Oscar and Leo every day as I struggled to carry on with my television show and run the newspaper. It didn't last.

A year later Oscar, Leo and I boarded a long-haul, one-way Air France flight across the Atlantic. No return ticket. That's how I found myself in France again, crossing a threshold into an unexpected second life in the country that had once been like home.

We began our new life just south of Paris in Fontainebleau where I'd taken a part-time position as a research fellow at the INSEAD business school; but soon moved into Paris where I was also working as a university lecturer. It didn't take long for me to notice that something was different. The France I was rediscovering wasn't the country I had left. There was a gloomy malaise hanging in the air. If the term "*joie de vivre*" ever had any meaning, there was no more joy in the French heart. Or perhaps it was I who had changed. I was now in my mid-forties, carrying the burden of experience, marked by success, setback, and tragedy. I felt like I was returning to a familiar place with unfamiliar emotions, rediscovering everything from a different angle, looking at things with different eyes.

When I arrived back in France, I crossed a Rubicon. There was no going back. I had no idea what was ahead. That is where this story begins.

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Chapter 1

Poodleland

Living next to the neo-gothic American Church of Paris was a reassuring aspect of my new life in Poodleland. That's how I'd once read the 7th arrondissement described: Poodleland. An uncharitable reference to these upper-crust Parisian precincts where rich ladies can be seen primly walking their well-coiffured little dogs down the wide and prosperous boulevards.

What could be less stressful, I thought, than living across the road from a church?

True enough, but there were a few surprises. My estate agent Michel had conveniently neglected to mention that, every morning, the street corner directly under my window is transformed into a cacophony of loud chatter, frantic movement, screaming children and car horn blasts. On weekdays just before nine o'clock, a stream of expat yummy mummies arrive in their gleaming BMWs and Mercedes. They pull up at the corner, park illegally with the motor running, jump out and quickly fetch their offspring strapped to the back seat, then hurriedly march the toddler down the pavement. The American Church, I quickly discovered, rents itself out to a number of organisations including the Montessori School. During the day it's more a primary school than a church. I stand at my window gulping a coffee while watching the daily ritual of attractive, pony-tailed mothers in tight-fitting leggings rushing their pampered tots into the church. And every morning, inevitably, a large truck rumbles down the narrow road to find itself blocked by a *bouchon* of illegally parked yummy-mummy vehicles. That's when the impatient horn blasts begin. A few minutes later, a young mother rushes out on her tiptoes waving her car keys apologetically, then jumps back into her SUV and roars off to keep an appointment with her tennis coach. I am witness to a variation of this little drama almost every morning.

The American Church has another, non-spiritual, revenue stream renting itself out as a Parisian backdrop for Japanese weddings. Rarely an afternoon goes by when I don't look out my window and witness a porcelain-skinned Japanese bride descending delicately from an immense limousine. A clutch of hired photographers and videographers hover around the elaborately staged scene, crouching, coming in close to get the perfect wedding snap as the bride takes the hand of her groom fitted awkwardly into a grey swallow-tailed tuxedo. An American Church minister is usually on the pavement in full ecclesiastic regalia, clasping his

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hands in a prayer-like gesture as the happy couple step forward. A Japanese interpreter provides instantaneous translation for the bizarre spectacle of bowing motions.

I'm told these elaborate ceremonies are not actually weddings properly speaking. The reason is a French bureaucratic snag. In France foreigners must meet a 40-day residency requirement to be legally married in this country. That presents a logistical problem for the Japanese couples who come to Paris to get "married". They're on a whirlwind romantic weekend following their traditional wedding in Japan. They can't camp out at the George V Hotel for forty days. To get around these legal obstacles, the American Church weddings are designated as "blessing" ceremonies. The church minister in clerical robes is really just a ceremonial prop. But it's big business. These romantically choreographed nuptials in Paris are part of a booming industry in Japan known as "wedding tourism". The product is the fantasy of an exotic marriage ceremony in the world's most romantic city. The cost can be more than €4,000.

The American Church performs more than 200 of these "blessings" every year. And it seems I'm around for just about every one of them, blessed with a front-row seat in my sitting room. Sometimes I walk straight into these well-orchestrated rituals when leaving my building with Oscar and Leo. A brief instant of awkwardness ensues as Japanese faces turn toward two fluffy white bichons. For an instant Oscar and Leo are the star attraction, not the bride and groom. Frozen smiles are exchanged. The porcelain-doll Japanese bride bows graciously toward Oscar and Leo. Occasionally the photographer moves closer and takes a picture of the dogs. I give a little wave, absurdly, and we continue moving up the road. I have sometimes wondered how many Japanese wedding albums feature photos of Oscar and Leo.

Walking two small white dogs in Poodleland has other minor inconveniences. One of them is that tourists, often wrestling with unwieldy maps, identify you as a reliable source of practical information. I am constantly approached by lost tourists looking like bewildered pilgrims. I am now so accustomed to their queries that I usually can anticipate their questions.

The most frequently asked is: "Where is the Eiffel Tower?" Sometimes I have only to look up, point, and say: "There it is." They look at me, embarrassed but grateful, thank me in broken English and then smile at Oscar and Leo.

The second most frequently asked question is where they can find the Alma Bridge. In most instances, as with the Eiffel Tower, I have only to point and say, "It's right there." The Pont de l'Alma is famous for two reasons. First, the 19th century statue of the French infantry "Zouave" soldier under the bridge has become an unofficial measure of the Seine's

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water levels. Paris weather forecasters on television often mention the Zouave when the water level is high. When the water touches the Zouave's feet, the Seine's banks risk overflowing. During the catastrophic Paris floods of 1910 the water reached the statue's shoulders. The second reason for the bridge's notoriety is Princess Diana. She was killed in the Alma underpass tunnel in 1997. The tourists who ask me where they can find the Alma Bridge are usually looking for the spot where Diana was killed.

The Alma Bridge is also intimately associated with one of Poodleland's strangest secrets, a forgotten chapter of neighbourhood legend that dares not speak its name. But it has a name: Magic City.

Magic City was an American-style amusement park built in 1900 as part of the Exposition Universelle that attracted millions of visitors that year to its magnificent pavilions decorating a vast section of Paris running from the Eiffel Tower to the Invalides. Magic City was a "*parc d'attraction*" enclave, a world within a world, constructed at the base of the Alma Bridge. Local historians tell us that Magic City stretched from 67 to 91 Quai d'Orsay along the Seine. I live on Quai d'Orsay and my building is within that range of addresses. Magic City was just outside my front door. Why they chose the English name "Magic City" I don't know, perhaps because it was inspired by American-style amusement parks on Coney Island, New York. But it was called Magic City, in English. I've seen an old photograph of the arched entrance at the foot of avenue Bosquet, just down the road from my building, and the words "Magic City" are clearly visible.

Built by Ernest Cognacq, the rich owner of the Samaritaine department store, Magic City featured all the usual theme park attractions – everything from roller coasters and water slides to more novel *fin de siècle* curiosities such as moving sidewalks and a mini railway. The theme park was eventually torn down and nothing remains today, but we have photos of most of its attractions thanks to Belle Époque postcards showing middle-class Parisians enjoying the distractions of modern technology. The moving sidewalk was evidently fascinating. I've even seen a short piece of film footage from 1900 showing Parisians taking tremendous delight in the banal gesture of hopping on and off, sometimes losing their balance.

The most popular Magic City attraction was a large ballroom where Parisians came to dance to orchestra music. By the "Années Folles" in the 1920s it had become popular with the Parisian gay scene. Particularly notorious were the Magic City "drag balls" held on Mardi Gras. The photographer Brassai took many pictures of these transvestite soirées showing a

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dance floor crowded with drag queens clutching their muscular male partners. The ballroom was shut down by French authorities in 1934.

Magic City had a curious epilogue. When the Germans invaded France in 1940, Hitler came through Poodleland on his way to pay homage to Napoleon's remains at the Invalides. The German army meanwhile requisitioned the old Magic City ballroom, which had been shut down years before and was lying in cobwebbed abandon. After the war France's state-owned television network moved into the same building and used the old ballroom stage as a TV studio. For decades, the French public television network was operating out of the old Magic City dance hall that had been a gay nightclub during the Roaring Twenties. Today France's public TV networks have moved elsewhere, but the old building is still there. Fittingly, the address is rue Cognacq-Jay, named after the same rich Parisian who built Magic City in 1900.

Today the legacy of Magic City has passed into oblivion. My bourgeois neighbours have never heard of it. Nothing remains of Magic City to remind them. Virtually everything was razed to make way for the Art Deco-style residential buildings whose bourgeois residents today would be mildly shocked to discover that they are living on the ruins of a place once infamous for nocturnal Parisian vice. I walk Oscar and Leo up and down rue Cognacq-Jay every day. It's just around the corner – the last vestige of the extravagant amusement park that, a hidden secret, is confined to Poodleland's long-forgotten archives.

On sunny days I take Oscar and Leo across Alma Bridge to the other side of the Seine – the side famous for Princess Diana's tragedy. We often lie on the patch of grass directly over the Alma tunnel where Diana was killed. Young women who work in the nearby offices go there at lunch hour to stretch out in the sun amongst the flowers surrounding a small statue of a reclining nude inscribed "La Seine". Across the intersection a clutch of tourists can always be seen gathered around the gold Flame of Liberty, which many believe is a memorial to Diana. In truth, the gold flame statue – a replica of the torch carried aloft by the Statue of Liberty – was a gift to the City of Paris made in 1989 by the *International Herald Tribune* newspaper. It was there eight years before Diana's death.

As we continue on our walk to the Champs de Mars, Oscar and Leo know exactly where they're going. They have an instinctive Poodleland guiding system that directs me down precisely the same configuration of streets each time. First they drag me up avenue Bosquet, then they turn down a small street called rue Edmond-Valentin which offers a breath-taking vista of the Eiffel Tower. The novelist James Joyce lived on this tiny street – at

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7 rue Edmond-Valentin – in the 1930s toward the end of his life. Joyce had a taste for the quiet bourgeois precincts of the Poodleland. A decade earlier, circa 1925 when Magic City was in full swing, Joyce occupied another comfortably bourgeois apartment just up the road at 2 Square de Robiac. There is no plaque on either building commemorating the presence of their illustrious tenant. I've seen plaques on Poodleland façades for obscure Polish poets and forgotten Bolivian revolutionaries. But James Joyce doesn't merit one.

Our walks toward the Invalides offer a Belle Époque promenade through the architectural remains of the Exposition Universelle. The 1900 world fair in Paris was the first international showcase of the Art Nouveau style. It was at that event that marvels such as the escalator and talking films were unveiled, and where Oscar Wilde evidently recited a verse from his poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" on a sound recording machine. Campbell's Soup also made its debut at the event. Most of the edifices constructed for the Exposition Universelle were torn down almost immediately after the event, including the row of national pavilions running along the banks of the Seine. Photographs of those edifices, most made of lightweight jute fibre and cement, show a magnificent burst of ornate wedding-cake buildings, almost Disneyland-like in their extravagance. Some of the Exposition Universelle structures still stand, such as the Grand Palais on the Right Bank and the Musée d'Orsay (then a rail station) farther down on the Left Bank. The Alexandre III bridge, lined with Art Nouveau lamps and statues of nymphs and cherubs along the rails, is another spectacular vestige of the 1900 world fair.

At the corner of Quai d'Orsay and Boulevard de La Tour-Maubourg, only a hundred yards from my door, stands one of my favourite buildings in Poodleland. It's the *hotel particulier* owned by the famous dandy, count Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac. Perhaps the most celebrated aesthete of his epoch, Montesquiou was the eccentric and homosexual aristocratic on whom Marcel Proust modelled the Baron de Charlus character in his literary masterpiece, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. I often walk by Montesquiou's residence with Oscar and Leo: it's a splendid tribute to the Belle Époque following the modern monstrosities built along the boulevard more recently – notably the grotesquely ugly South African embassy, still a bomb-proof bunker decades after the end of the apartheid regime. Sadly, a similar fate has befallen a portion of Montesquiou's residence, which was built in 1858 during the Second Empire. One wing was knocked down and modernised. Today it's occupied by a Chinese Cultural Centre. If you look closely, however, you can see a lauded "M" engraved in the stone above the ornate windows.

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More than a century later, Poodleland is the victim of its privileged location and outward prosperity. The neighbourhood is cluttered with mendicants, homeless people, gypsies, petty thieves and organised bandits seeking to profit – some through pity, others through ploys – from the wealth of the local residents. It's impossible to walk down the rue Saint-Dominique without passing gypsy beggars on the pavement, usually positioned next to cash machines or outside the Saint-Pierre-du-Gros-Caillou church. In the evening when grocery store bins are put out, homeless scavengers can be seen rummaging like bone-grubbers through garbage bags to find packages of expired food. I watch my bourgeois neighbours pass stiffly by these scenes of human desperation. Occasionally I see a bourgeois Parisian lady leaning down to speak to a ragged old woman huddled on the pavement, and then reaching into her bag to pull out a few coins.

I have my own quirky method of showing compassion toward the needy. When I go to my gym in Montparnasse I come across the same pale old woman crouched in a doorway holding a small cup. Despite her obvious poverty, she looks like an ordinary French woman who perhaps once was a wife and mother. One can't help wondering what terrible event pushed her into such desperation. I have never had the courage to ask her for her life story, but I sometimes stop to give her a few euros.

Closer to home I've taken a personal interest in a French hobo and his aged black poodle. Like the women in the Montparnasse doorway, this poor chap looks like an ordinary Frenchman, perhaps forty years old, fallen on hard times and given to drink, but clearly devoted to his beloved dog. One day I stopped to ask the poor man his dog's name.

“Boulie,” he said. “He's fifteen years old. Almost blind, but still healthy.”

His elocution in French was perfectly acceptable and I could see in his eyes that he'd once known a normal, decent existence. He and Boulie became regular fixtures in Poodleland as I took Oscar and Leo out for walks. I began handing him coins, always stopping to chat and caress Boulie. One day I asked him how long he'd been living in the street.

“Eight years,” he said. “Divorce. I lost everything. Except Boulie.”

Boulie desperately needed a grooming, the poor dog hadn't had his hair cut for months, perhaps longer. He was the shaggiest poodle in Poodleland. Boulie also needed to see a vet. So I proposed a deal: I gave him forty euros on the condition that the money was used to pay for Boulie's grooming. And I told him to take Boulie to my vet in rue Saint-Dominique and give my name. I would tell the vet he was coming and I would cover the bills.

The poor man looked at me in disbelief.

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“Remember,” I said, handing him the money, “this is for Boulie, get him groomed. I want to see him with a haircut the next time I see you.”

“No worries,” he replied, taking the bills from my hand.

He was good to his word: the next time I saw them, Boulie had a haircut. And he’d been to see the vet. Still blind, but healthier and happier. Thus I became the unofficial godfather of Boulie the near-blind fifteen-year-old black poodle.

The homeless people and beggars in Poodleland are generally harmless. The same cannot be said of the Romanian gypsies – or “Roms” as they are called. There is no gentle way to put it, the Roms are despised in France as a foreign, nomadic sub-class whose main employ is begging and thievery. The presence of Roms in France, as in many other European countries, is the subject of heated political debate. Hard-line conservatives want them deported, while left-leaning liberals argue that they should be integrated into French society. But integration isn’t easy. Roms live in shantytown encampments on the outskirts of French towns and most do not send their children to schools. In Paris, Rom women panhandle in the streets, while teenage gypsy girls move in packs on the Champs de Mars and other popular spots to pester tourists for money on the pretext of signing a “petition” for non-existent causes. Rom boys work as pickpockets in the Métro and furtively snatch smartphones lying on tables in Starbucks and McDonald’s. Rom men, meanwhile, are engaged in more serious forms of swindle and larceny. They sometimes pass themselves off as workmen from the French electricity utility to enter the apartments of rich ladies, and once inside pilfer their expensive jewellery.

I have been cautioned by neighbours never to provoke the Roms with rebuke, for they can sometimes be aggressive. According to a Poodleland neighbour, a lady was recently walking her dog along the Seine when accosted by a Rom. When she upbraided the gypsy beggar, he grabbed her puppy and tossed it into the river. What happened to the little dog, I do not know.

Some time ago a group of Rom women started trafficking Yorkie puppies right on the esplanade along the Seine in front of my place. The first reaction amongst my bourgeois neighbours was disbelief that turned to indignation and anger. The police were eventually called. I happened to be walking Oscar and Leo down the Quai d’Orsay when two police vans pulled up and several policemen swooped down to arrest two gypsy women caught with more than a dozen puppies stuffed into suffocating sacks and bags. They were flogging these little dogs in the park like trinkets. I looked on, astonished, as two female policemen loaded their

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van with several bags filled with of yapping puppies. Their male colleagues were putting handcuffs on the two gypsy women.

Not long ago I bumped into a pleasant American lady walking her little white dog in front of the Invalides. There is tacit “Small White Dog” rule in Poodleland according to which you are allowed to approach and converse with anyone who is also walking a small white dog. In this case, I had two small white dogs and she had one, a Coton de Tuléar. The Small White Dog rule definitely applied.

Her name was Margaret, a tiny sparrow-like American lady of perhaps fifty-five or sixty. Her little dog was called Suzie. Married to a French businessman, Margaret had been living in Paris for more than thirty years and had raised her children here. She lived just across the road from the Invalides near rue de Grenelle, not far from novelist Edith Wharton’s address in Paris a century ago.

We walked together in front of the dry moat in the sights of the old Prussian canons while Oscar and Leo played with Suzie. The promenade in front of the Invalides is majestic. Even from a distance you can see an equestrian statue of Louis XIV above the Invalides’ enormous portico. The inscription refers explicitly to the Sun King: “*Ludovicus magnus militibus regali munificentia in perpetuum providens has aedes posuit. An MDCLXXV*”. The canons thrusting out, some oxidised green with the passage of centuries, were seized from Austrian and Turkish armies. They bear the inscription *ultima ratio regum*: “the final argument of kings”.

As we strolled past these relics of distant wars, Margaret mentioned that she’d recently been mugged by a Rom who snatched her smartphone.

“No!” I protested.

“Yes, it was in broad daylight,” she said. “I was sitting on a park bench checking my emails. I put the phone down on the bench to pick up Suzie – and suddenly he just grabbed it. I took hold of him and fought back, but he threw me to the ground and ran away. I was screaming and shouting and crying. It was a horrifying experience. I couldn’t believe it. I was traumatised for weeks.”

I told her the story about the gypsy puppy-trafficking ring on the esplanade. She shared with me another story, this one about a group of Roms who had broken into her building and penetrated the basement *caves* where the residents stored valuable possessions.

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“They smashed every padlock on every *cave* and took everything of value,” she said. “Some of our neighbours lost expensive paintings and Louis XV chairs. Fortunately they only got our wine collection. All of it.”

After that shock, Margaret decided to take pro-active measures to protect herself – literally. She enrolled in “Krav Maga” self-defence classes to learn counter-attack street-fighting skills. I’d never heard of Krav Maga. At first I thought Margaret couldn’t possibly be serious. But she was deadly serious.

“I’m never going to let myself be attacked like that again,” she said. “Krav Maga techniques are used by the Israeli army. They give you the skills to fight off attackers and inflict serious injury on them.”

Given Margaret’s tiny size, I wondered if Krav Maga techniques, even if mastered, could help her fight off a much larger attacker. She was a believer, however, and encouraged me to sign up for the same Krav Maga course. I was intrigued, but non-committal.

“Where do they take place?” I asked

“At the American Church,” she said.

For some reason, I wasn’t surprised.