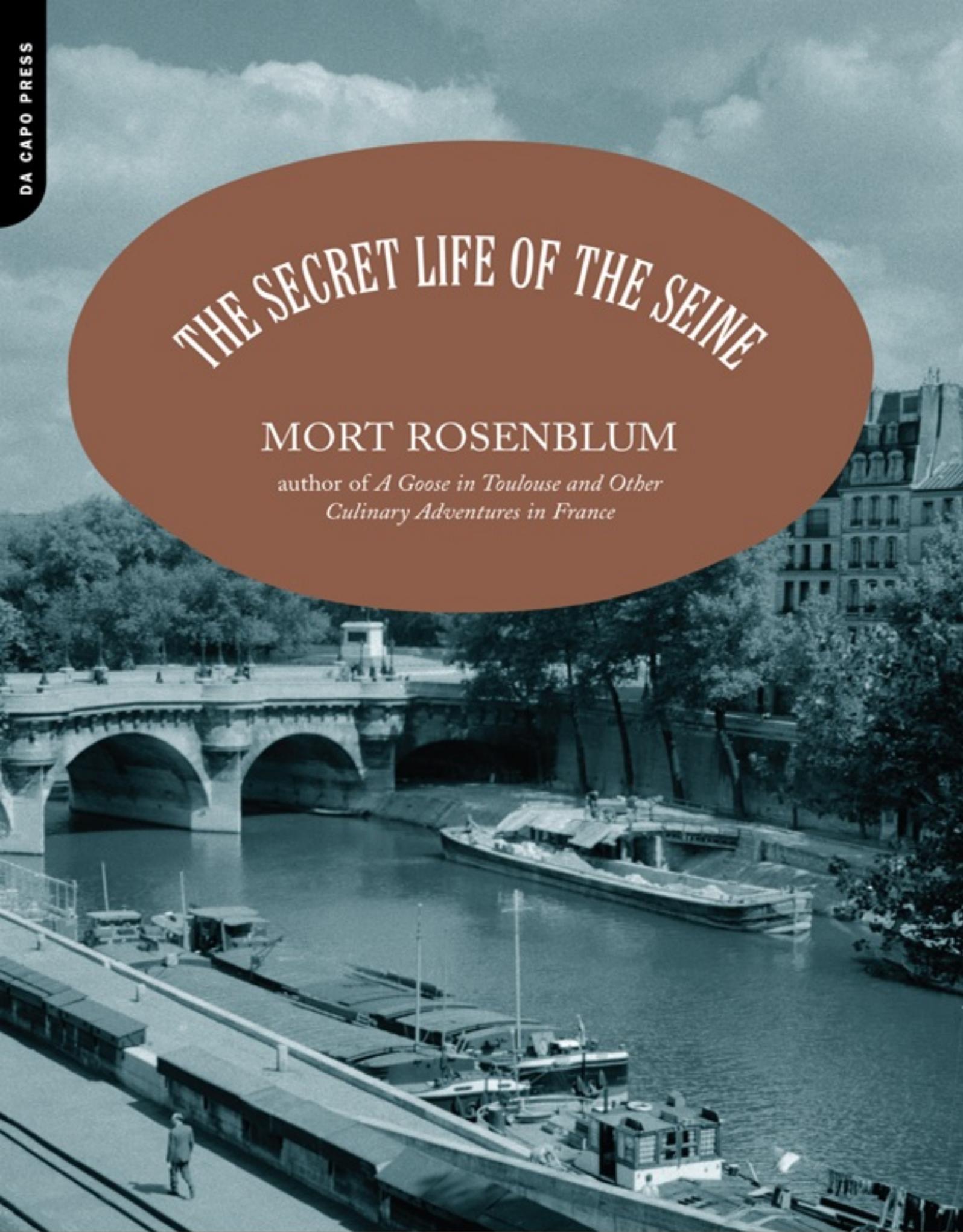


DA CAPO PRESS

# THE SECRET LIFE OF THE SEINE

MORT ROSENBLUM

author of *A Goose in Toulouse and Other  
Culinary Adventures in France*



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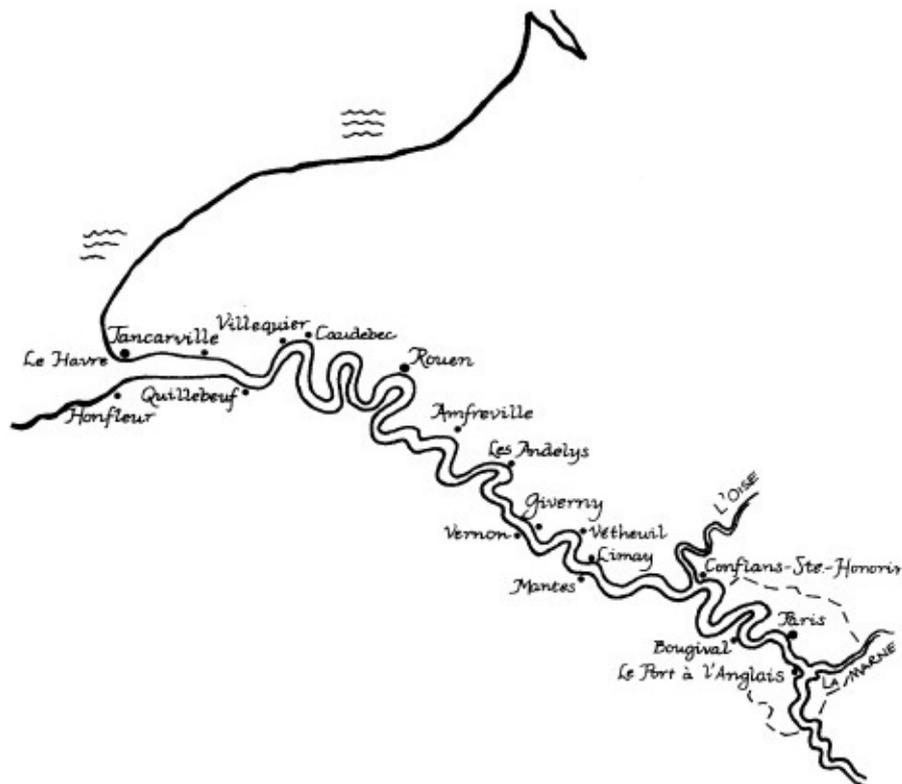
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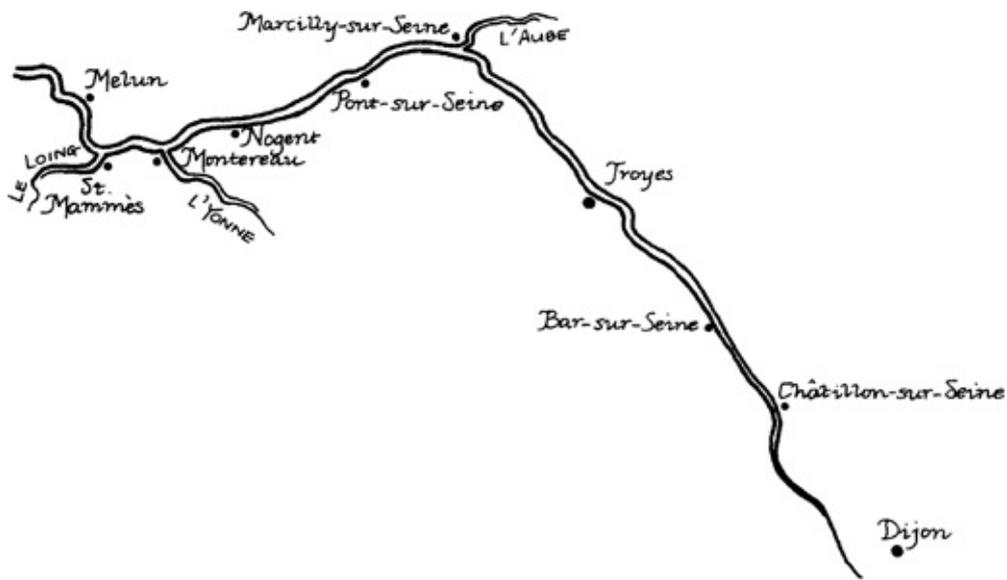
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# THE SECRET LIFE *of the* SEINE



**MORT ROSENBLUM**

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Printed in the United States of America.

Designed by Dede Cummings

Set in 10 ½-point Meridien by Pagesetters, Inc.

Cataloging-in-Publication data for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

First Da Capo Press edition 2001

**ISBN-10: 0-306-81074-3 ISBN-13: 978-0-306-81074-9**

eBook ISBN: 9780786731183

Published by Da Capo Press

A Member of the Perseus Books Group

<http://www.dacapopress.com>

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*For Jeannette, who managed to cram a lifetime's stuff  
under a moldy bunk and never stopped smiling*

## Author's Note

SOME BOOKS WRITE THEMSELVES. The subject is so compelling that those connected with it are eager to talk and share experiences. I found this along the Seine, from Paul Lamarche at the source to Michel Lemoine at the mouth. To name them all would be to list the characters in the book, but I am grateful to each.

Specifically, my thanks to Jean-Pierre Ardouin, Jacques Donnez, Jillie Faraday, Annie Amirda, Charlie Godefroid, Olivier de Cornois, Frangoise and Jean-Robert Villepigue, Hazel Young, Eric Tempe, Phil Cousineau, Christine Guyot, Jean Allardi and, at the top of the list, the mysterious Philippe. Also, of course, thanks to the boating party: Jeannette Hermann, Gretchen Hoff, Val Gardner, Dev Kernan, Jim Ravenscroft, Chuck McCutcheon, John Cooke, and Grabowski, wherever she is.

Amassing data and checking facts took a lot of help. For this, I thank Yota Milona, Alice Clark and Allison Penn.

Geri Thoma, pal and agent, persuaded me to put my passion for the Seine between covers. She solicited the interest of Bill Patrick, pal and editor, who made it happen. The reader will join me in thanking Patrick for his loving little remarks on margins of the initial manuscript: “weak,” “mundane,” “yuk!” and so forth. In the nature of things, authors are to publishers as mongeese are to serpents. Not so here. I am grateful to the whole house of Addison-Wesley for embracing this project from its first moments.

M.R.

# 1 River of Light

EVERY OTHER MORNING, my friend Paul slouched into the office with yet another hard-luck story about the boat he loved. The something-something had clogged and frozen his family overnight. A *bateau-mouche* had decked his poop, or pooped his deck. The river had risen, and he needed a dinghy to get home.

Paul slouched because he was six feet one inch high, and the saloon ceiling of *La Vieille* was not. Winter or summer, his clothes were ripe with mildew and diesel. One sleeting December night, his clothes smelled even worse. He had slipped on the gangway and belly flopped into the Seine.

Paul could talk your ear off about epoxy resin fatigue and wet carpets. He and his wife, Jill, had lived aboard *La Vieille* since the time they nursed her ancient teak timbers across the English Channel in 1967 and tied her up in the middle of Paris. That they had a son to rear on a fifty-four-foot boat didn't faze them, not even when young Ozzie grew so tall he could stand erect only with the hatch open.

During the decade that Paul and I worked together, I could never fathom his devotion to *La Vieille*. But I knew why he loved the Seine. There is not a river like it in the world, for beauty and passion along its banks. Its history is as old as the Jordan's, and it is no muddy stream across moonscape. If hardly a Mississippi, it still conceals treacherous sandbanks that keep boatmen anxiously marking their twain.

From the time I first gasped at the view from the Pont Marie, years ago, I was smitten by the Seine. And back then, I didn't know the half of it.

While Paul and Jill lived aboard *La Vieille*, I rented a country cottage four floors up in an old building in the heart of Paris, on the Ile Saint-Louis. Each time Paul lamented over his Webasto diesel heater, I thought of my cheery steam radiators and fireplaces on two floors. When winds and waves rocked the boat, I shut double doors to a terrace rose garden. I was a happy landlubber, and my clothes did not smell.

Late one night, I walked home across the Pont Sully. Golden light from the Quai d'Anjou glittered on the Seine. The narrow street curved by slate-roofed stone mansions that had sheltered the families, from the Voltaires to the Rothschilds, who had made France into France. Climbing the last steps to my door, I figured I had found the loveliest speck of real estate in the world. With any luck, I'd live there forever.

Inside, I exulted on the subject to my friend and roommate. "We have to leave," she said.

It was a typical low Parisian story. A local reptile who inherited some money had heard about the apartment and visited our landlord. The short version of the story is that we had a few months to clear out, with no idea where to go. I only knew that I had to be near the Seine.

Paul showed up for work, as usual, with another *La Vieille* hard-luck story. "You don't want to sell that old wreck, do you?" I asked. "I just might," he said. Not long

after, I was the one telling the stories and reeking of old boat.

Paul and Jill had decided to move to England, and they were looking for friendly hands to take the helm. I was a reluctant candidate, a son of Arizona desert and a klutz with wrench or varnish brush. It took only one lunch on deck. The spring air was electric. Dutch barges lazed past, piloted by housewives in slippers and patrolled by stubby dogs trained to coil rope with their teeth. Tugs puffed by, their wakes sloshing the Burgundy in our glasses. On neighboring boats and along the quai, I watched characters Hugo had missed and Flaubert never imagined. Along with foul water, I saw waterfowl. It had to be Paris because the Eiffel Tower loomed over the golden cherubs on the Pont Alexandre IE. But we were also somewhere else, in a place most Parisians seldom see.

Only a few nylon ropes, a power cable and a garden hose connected us to the real world. Suddenly, I understood why my friends loved *La Vieille* and had resolved to sell her with lumps in their throats. I had discovered the secret life of the Seine.



A glance at the river in Paris tells you what is going on in France. If it is not slopping over its stone quais at the new year, farmers had a bad time with drought. When it runs fast, high, and cocoa brown in April, the skiing was terrific-keepers had to drop the sluice gates on the Marne to drain off melting snow. When France is happiest, for a bicentennial celebration of the revolution or only Bastille Day, barges and barks jam the Seine on their way to the fireworks.

You can gauge the crop of tourists by counting heads hanging over the rails of *bateaux-mouches*. When barges are so heavy with gravel that water splashes over their gunwales, construction is booming. Seine watchers knew France was hooked on American television when the police began blasting past in hot little patrol boats, driver erect at the wheel, bound for lunch à la *Miami Vice*.

And downstream past Rouen, that glance at the Seine can tell you the state of the world. Long before most people got their lips around a new household word, *perestroika*, Jacques Mevel knew the curtain was coming down. A river pilot, he travels the world each day without leaving the Seine. He noticed that Soviet sea captains suddenly started smiling and talking to strangers.

From the beginning, the French soul has bobbed in the waters of the Seine. On its bridges, love blooms; beneath them, lives end. Hardly anyone can tell you exactly where the river starts, or much else about it, but it flows through every romantic's spirit. It nourished Maupassant's pen and watered Monet's lily pond.

Paris was the City of Light long before there were switches to flip. The *rayonnement*, that radiance which the French have always beamed to the less enlightened, emanates from the pinks and oranges and sparkling flashes of the sun sinking into the Seine. When Baudelaire wrote that all around was nothing but "*ordre et beauté; luxe, calme et volupté*" he was looking at the river off the Ile Saint-Louis.

A few generations ago, Guillaume Apollinaire mused:

*Beneath the Pont Mirabeau flows the Seine  
And our love . . .*

*While passes beneath the bridge of our arms  
The eternal gaze of the sultry waves.*

But the river is not always as the poets would have it, voluptuous and unchanging. In late winter, its mood shifts. When only slightly aroused, it floods the fast lanes along the Left Bank, gridlocking traffic from Saint-Michel to the Eiffel Tower. In 1910, hell-bent on mayhem, it went knee-deep into the fancy shops off the Champs-Élysées. A century ago, by the placid banks of a Normandy village, the current swallowed Victor Hugo's daughter Léopoldine, who toppled from a boat and sank in her Sunday best.

For two thousand years, the Seine was alimentary canal to a nation that took its nourishment seriously. Grain moved upriver, passing cargoes of wine headed downstream. Most food travels by road and rail these days, but a look at the Seine suggests that it is still at least France's digestive tract. By the time it reaches Paris, the river carries enough detritus of civilization to sicken your average sewer rat. This, of course, does not deter the swimmers who race periodically from Notre-Dame toward Neuilly, emerging undissolved. The Seine will confound you every time.

Visitors have never gotten enough of the river. Gertrude Stein ran her dogs by the Seine. Henry Miller walked off his excesses along it; in a houseboat, Anai's Nin took hers to new levels. Fish was the first course of Hemingway's moveable feast; he loved to watch the anglers along the Pont des Arts footbridge: "It was easier to think . . . seeing people doing something they understood." The idea of Seine sushi is pretty revolting, but the old guys are still there in late spring when fishing is best.

Today's generation, if less lost than Hemingway's, still comes to the Seine in summer to shed inhibitions. Parisians strip down to nothing and sunbathe on its warm stone banks. They hide their wine in brown bags only when embarrassed by the label. On certain stretches of the quayside, Paris is gay. On others, kids and dogs frolic. Aging pigeon feeders occupy the benches by day, but lovers claim them at night.

Even its small mysteries intrigue. One evening a black wingtip shoe floated past my boat, dry inside, sole flat on the surface. Enough Parisians insist they can walk on water; would one of them shortly stride past? My upstream neighbor, Pierre Richard, did well as the lead in a film called *The Tall Blond Man with One Black Shoe*. Who knows?

People mark their history with memories of the Seine. One night in 1958, my friend Jo Menell stood on the Pont-Neuf and watched mysterious loglike shapes bobbing by the dozen in the swift current. France was at war to keep Algeria under her wing, and the shapes were Algerians murdered by French zealots who countered terror in Algiers with terror in Paris. Bodies, as tradition demanded, were dumped in the river.

Politics changed, but the eternal waves flowed on. A few years after Jo stood on the Pont-Neuf, Algeria and most other French colonies went free, and people of two dozen cultures crowded into the *métropole*. By 1993, France decided it was no longer a land of asylum. On that same bridge, police stopped an African and demanded his papers for a routine identity check. He flung himself over the stone parapet and drowned in the Seine.

"The Seine is the great receptacle which first receives the victims of assassination

or despair,” wrote Fanny Trollope in 1836. “But they are not long permitted to elude the vigilance of the Parisian police; a huge net, stretched across the river at Saint-Cloud, receives and retains whatever the stream brings down; and anything that retains a trace of human form which is found amidst the product of the fearful draught is daily conveyed to La Morgue;—DAILY; for rarely does it chance that for four-and-twenty hours its melancholy biers remain unoccupied; often do eight, ten, a dozen corpses at a time arrive by the frightful caravan from ‘les filets de Saint-Cloud.’”

These days, the number is down. During 1992, Paris police recovered thirteen bodies from the Seine. They rescued another twenty-three people who had fallen in, accidentally or on purpose. And they extracted nine cars. It was an average year.

The net at Saint-Cloud is also down. Today, God knows what would shred it, or fill it, in minutes. When the current is fast, huge trees are hurled downstream, like battering rams. Other items, smaller than trees and sometimes unspeakable, also float down the Seine. Here, for example, is a brief sampling from the log of a young visitor to *La Vieille* who watched for half an hour: one mattress, countless Styrofoam containers, a bloated pig, several condoms, dead fish, live ducks, a television set, someone’s jacket, someone else’s trousers, many people’s lunch—at one stage or another.

American scientists have found fifty-seven varieties of pollution in the Seine. Those racing swimmers notwithstanding, it carries a hundred times more bacteria than the European Community’s safety level for swimming. In launching an ambitious campaign to clean up the river, Paris mayor Jacques Chirac announced that he would swim in it by 1994. The minister of health replied that he would be waiting on the bank with a towel and antibiotics. Chirac did not keep his promise.

Whatever Paris does, industries manage to elude measures to stop pollution. In 1991, Greenpeace blew the whistle. The group thrives in France under the slogan “You can’t sink a Rainbow”—a reference to the incident a few years back, in New Zealand, when French agents blasted a hole in the Greenpeace flagship, *Rainbow Warrior*, and killed a crewman. Most Frenchmen laughed it off; that was about polluting the Pacific. When it comes to the Seine, officialdom is more sympathetic. Greenpeace eco-warriors welded shut the waste pipes of some major offenders, choking them in their own poisonous sludge, and authorities began enforcing the law. Sort of.

Beyond industrial waste, there is the aging and overtaxed Paris sewage system. Even a little rain channels filth to the river. At times during the year, the largest tributary of the Seine is a river of noxious effluent from the Achères treatment plant.

Today the river balances on an ecological edge. Its fish feel the slightest rattle of the food chain. Early in June 1992, I came home from a trip to find the river running thick with bloated bream and carp cadavers. And I was seeing only the first few. Over three weeks, firemen scooped out a thousand tons of rotting fish along a twenty-five-mile stretch of the Seine. It seems the river was low, the water was warm, and an oily film cut the level of oxygen. Heat triggered a rash of bacteria, which ate up even more oxygen. A biblical deluge backed up the Paris sewers, pouring filth into the river. Half the fish in the Paris area died that week. Then again, half lived. Judging from the size of those that didn’t, the river is alive with fish the size of small sheep.

Within weeks, high-tech barges were pumping billions of bubbles of oxygen into the river, and Parisians shrugged off the expense. Fortunately, the incident coincided

with the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. And this was, after all, the Seine.



Ichthyology aside, other species are endangered as modern times alter the course of the Seine. A whole class of freshwater salts, wharf rats, and river riders are also going. Like the fish, however, they are going slowly.

When I moved to the river, I found a cast of the old characters right off the end of my gangplank. Jean Privat looked after the quai at the Touring Club de France, where fifty converted barges and boats are settled in a floating community between the Pont de l'Alma and the footbridge just above the Pont de la Concorde. His job was to make sure nothing sank.

Winter and summer, he wore an increasingly off-white yachting cap and an American bomber jacket he picked up while working with U.S. forces in the war. A dashing figure, even when a liquid breakfast slurred his sentences, he always managed to have the last word. He spoke river, and urban mariners depended upon him for translation. When Jean died in 1990, he left in character. It was a busy day at the crematorium, and his family, having paid extra, refused to be shunted off to a chapel annex. The mortician was firm and so was the family, but Jean, of course, had the last word. The heavy caisson bearing his coffin suddenly rolled on its track—across the undertaker's toes.

After Jean's ashes were scattered on the water, his boat hook went to Jacques Donnez, who spells his name "Jack" (no one else does). Jacques looks like a cross between Jean-Paul Sartre and Popeye, with a raspy voice and a craggy squint behind opaque glasses. At first, for me, he was mainly prime character material. Then I asked him to teach me to navigate. By the third time he spared me from making chopsticks of a fine old boat, he was Captain, sir, and a friend.

Jacques was born afloat in 1939, an eighth-generation Seine boatman. He and wife, Lisette, married on a floating church barge, made a decent income ferrying coal, sand, grain, and wine while their laundry flapped in the wind on the aft deck. But trucks and trains cut deeply into the market. In 1976, they sold the barge for scrap and came ashore. He took a job on the quai, where he can fix anything made by man and wait out anything delivered by nature. He starts early, works hard, and does his level best to help Burgundy vineyards prosper.

"*Ouuuais, je l'aime,*" says Jacques, a man of few words, when asked to rhapsodize on the Seine. The trick is to watch him look at the river; his eyes are as expressive as temperature gauges. When he furrows his brow at the rising current, it is time to get your car off the quai. He is like most hearty old marine equipment, utterly dependable as long as you check the meters. When his nose flashes red, for example, it is not the time to have him change your bilge pump.



In no time at all, the river bewitched me. Most likely, it happened that July morning when I was wakened by a mother duck giving hell to eight fuzzy ducklings. With a fresh cup of coffee, I sat on deck to survey my new neighborhood. The Seine was calm

but by 8 A.M. *La Vieille* was rocking gently, like a cradle. The air bore a pleasant nip and fresh river scent. The bridge statues gleamed gold. Suddenly, sweet notes of music wafted down to the deck. Up in the trees, masked by leaves, I saw a bandsman in blue and red with shiny brass buttons tuning a French horn.

On balmy summer nights, we sat on deck until the Eiffel Tower blinked off at 1 A.M. Then we drank wine and giggled, forgetting to go to bed, until it was time for sunrise and the duck serenade.

Soon, I started talking funny. When I remarked to a normal person, “I’ve got dry rot in my head,” he nodded in agreement, not aware that I was referring to the bathroom ceiling. At the time, the world was in turmoil, and my job as a reporter kept me nearer the Volga, the Vltava, and Victoria Falls. But every time I came home, the Seine had a new surprise. I decided I had to learn more about this magical river and the people who live on it.

The books lined up in *La Vieille*’s saloon were of some help. Mostly, they confirmed a single bit of nautical knowledge: deck leaks make pages stick together. Within a year I had hired storage space for a library that would have capsized the boat: old musings in heavy leather, mildewed maps and slim volumes of verse. I spent afternoons gazing at paintings to see what had captivated the impressionists. I studied the river’s moods, attuned to rising currents and falling barometers. With the help of Captain Jacques, I got *La Vieille* ready to roll, and we snooped into the river’s innermost secrets. The more I realized that the depths were unfathomable, the more I loved the mission.

Looking around, I found the river’s rich history bubbled regularly to the surface, refusing to lie dead in books. One morning I returned to Paris to find a Viking longboat— gargoyles, oars and all—docked at the visitors’ quai. This being the Seine, it would not have surprised me to find it full of hairy Norwegians in animal skins and pointy helmets looking for loot after a thousand-year time warp. It was a replica, part of an exhibition at the Grand Palais.

Since Roman times, the Seine was an Old World thoroughfare. Norsemen routinely plundered riverside abbeys and towns until Charles the Simple bought off King Rollo in 911 with a spare daughter and Normandy. The Vikings turned their energies into taming the river; their channels and dikes lasted ten centuries. On the Seine, William the Conqueror put together the flotilla that invaded England. He chased his cousins back to Scandinavia, and they have yet to return, except for Wimbledon.

Among the old stones of Paris are traces of walls built to repel the Vikings and remnants of later medieval forts that Napoléon III blasted away last century to let the river run free. By Notre-Dame, for instance, the Petit Pont has been around in one form or another since the birth of Christ. It was once flanked by wooden buildings, but they went in 1718, in a Parisian precursor to the Mrs. O’Leary cow incident. When things got lost in the Seine, back then, people went to a local convent for a hunk of bread blessed with a prayer to St. Nicolas. This, balanced on a plank along with a lighted candle, was placed in the river. Wherever the candle went out was the spot to look. A widow who lost her only son in the current launched a plank to find his body. The candle did not go out. It ignited a hay barge which struck the bridge, setting a three-day fire. Twenty-two houses burned to the pilings.

As the French went from monarchy to republic to empire to monarchy to empire to

republic, the Seine remained their centerpiece. I had not only a river to explore but also a few thousand years of the soul of France.



The Seine that is synonymous with Paris is actually 482 miles long. In a straight line, it travels only 250 miles, but the Seine is in no hurry. It wells up from three cracks at the foot of a limestone hill in a forest glade in the Cote d'Or province of Burgundy, thirty miles northwest of Dijon. The Gauls, knowing magic when they saw it, built a temple at the source to the river goddess, Sequana, whose name was later smoothed out into *Seine*. Until the fourth century A.D., when German invaders destroyed the temple, pagan Perrier cured ancient ailments. A few believers remain convinced.

For the first mile or so, you can pop a cork across the Seine while *déjeunering sur l'herbe*. By the time it reaches Le Havre, after twenty-five locks in all, the river has broadened to an estuary hardly distinguishable from the English Channel beyond. From source to mouth, the Seine drops only sixteen hundred feet. At its widest, it can be dead calm, translucent in deep green hues. Or it can look like cafe au lait on the boil.

“La Seine” is sanctified by signboard on an old stone bridge in the village of Billy-lès-Chanceaux, eight miles from the source. The water beneath is crystal clear and hardly deep enough to drown a dwarf. It twists and turns, picking up the odd stream, until it reaches the bottom of Champagne country. By then, its banks are dotted with the remains of wooden wheels that once ground flour or cranked up a few watts of electricity.

Châtillon-sur-Seine is a miniature Paris, Seine-wise; its oldest part nestles between two branches of the river. But neither branch is wider than ten yards or more than a yard deep. Navigation starts at Marcilly, 120 miles from the source. River traffic once reached the medieval port at Troyes via canal, but the grand waterway ordered by Napoléon was closed less than a century after it opened, one more casualty of a vanishing way of life.

At Montereau, the Seine gets significant. The Yonne joins in, doubling the flow and adding traffic from canals and rivers that reach the Mediterranean. Farther on, at the impressionists' paradise of Moret, there is the Loing. Soon after, the Essonne. Then the Marne empties in, bringing water from the mountains of the Vosges and barges from beyond the Rhine, as far away as the Black Sea. The Seine is swift and murky and ready for Paris.

From the City of Light, the Seine winds into the heart of darkness. Past the abandoned hulk of a Renault factory on the He Séguin outside Paris, the riverside homes peter out. Suddenly, it is as if you are on Conrad's steamer among mangrove swamps on the Congo. And then, just as abruptly, the river turns and you sense the luminosity that inspired so many painters.

The Oise comes in below Paris, and the Eure and others. Long past the wrought-iron terrace of La Fournaise, where Renoir painted the luncheon clientele and Maupassant scribbled on the walls, it passes near the village near Rouen where Flaubert's Emma Bovary learned home economics the hard way. Plaques along the way mark where battered Englishmen went home after their Hundred Years' War and

where, a long time later, the English helped run off Germans. A little tower marks the spot where Napoléon's ashes came ashore, for a carriage ride to Paris, after sailing up the Seine in a frigate painted black.

On a map of Normandy, Sequana looks like an earthworm with stomach cramps. The river snakes among spectacular castles and abbeys, set against a backdrop of plunging white escarpments and thick woods. In spring, its lazy loops are flanked in the shocking pink of cherry orchards. It changes again and again, meandering through history and humdrum, on toward open waters.

No statesman has missed the significance of this varied thoroughfare. "Le Havre, Rouen, and Paris are a single town," Napoléon said, "and the Seine is Main Street." He planned to build canals so that boats from lesser states to the east could visit the capital of Europe by inland waterway.

The Rhône, wild and wide, was once a Roman freeway. The Loire, lovely and long, winds among sumptuous chateaux. Next to either, the Seine is a stream. Its normal flow, four hundred cubic meters a second, is a fifth of the Rhône's and a sixth of the Danube's. But the Seine and its tributaries water an area totaling 78,878 square kilometers, 15 percent of France. Seventeen million inhabitants, a third of the French population, live within its reach. More than half of France's heavy industry, 60 percent of the phosphoric acid plants, 37 percent of the petroleum works, and a pair of nuclear reactors flank the greater Seine. The port of Paris handles twenty-six million tons of freight a year, equal to a million truckloads.

With all that, the people who live and work on the Seine reject the geographers' term *fleuve*, the French word for a river that feeds into the sea. Instead, the Seine is *la rivière*, which is supposed to apply only to gentle inland waterways. Sequana was a lady, Seine people insist, and so is their river.



If you live on the Seine, you are constantly asked two questions: Isn't it damp? (The answer is yes) and Where do you get your croissants in the morning? (The answer is: At the bakery). Occasionally, some kindred spirit has a third: When are you going to die and leave this to me?

It is agreeable, as the French say, to take a candlelight cruise without leaving home. You can go away for a weekend and not pack. Your morning alarm is those ducks quacking. Friends visit without coaxing. My pal Barbara Gerber fled a Stockholm winter and dropped into the nearest deck chair. When a *bateau-mouche* passed, she flung out her arms and yelled, "Envy me."

But there are drawbacks. A boat is not a great place for people who tend to drop their keys. When you're all dressed up with someplace to go, you don't want to crawl around your engines looking for car keys that slipped through the gearshift slot on the wheelhouse floor. Sleepwalkers, too, ought to think twice. Life afloat is like living in a small apartment, in a zone of frequent, quiet earthquakes.

This key business can be serious. Once my friend Gretchen and I rented a van from a hole-in-the-wall agency just before it closed for an extended holiday weekend. The next morning, at 6 A.M., we assembled furniture and another couple for a long drive south. I put my briefcase on the deck table, placed the keys atop it, and went below for

a final check. Gretchen, meanwhile, was loading the last stuff. She called down through the hatch: “Was there something on your bag that might have gone clink on the deck and splashed in the water?”

For half an hour, we fumed like furnace flues, cursing fate. Then we quietly pleaded for a miracle, and one happened. Double-checking, I found that I had stupidly hung the van keys on the hook where my car keys should be. The Seine had swallowed the keys to my Peugeot, and I had an extra set of those. One is not always that lucky.

Jilly Faraday, a neighbor, dropped her key ring into the Seine: boat, car, the works. She called the *pompier*s, the river firemen who get bored waiting for real disaster. A frogman poked in the muck fifteen feet underwater. He found the keys.

Boats are also not the best places to teach an old cat new tricks. The lesson was made manifest in 1992 when a Marin County cat took up residence aboard *La Vieille*. Already slightly embarrassed by her name, Princess the cat had a few adjustment problems, one of which was that she fell into the river. No one knew it until she jumped back through a porthole onto the bed, her fluffy long hair matted and stinking, and produced a plaintive meow.

She was on penicillin for two weeks. All we know for sure is that cats, when pressed, can do the backstroke as well as chin-ups, and that Princess had run through eight and a half lives.

But then there is the secret life of the Seine, a separate *arrondissement* of the spirit. For years, when I watched the Seine from above, I treasured the river as a lovely but inanimate path through the center of the most thrilling settlement I knew. It took moving onto it, having it seep into my bilges and turn my underwear green, for me to realize that it was alive, a settlement in its own right, peopled by an elaborate class system of citizens who pledged allegiance to it.

Where else in Paris can you love thy neighbor? Late one night, I was washing dishes in the galley and heard someone bellowing my name. It was Olivier, who lives just aft, setting off in his little red boat with a load of nubile friends and his habitual shit-eating grin. They were off to the mysterious Ile d’Amour upriver and around the bend, accessible only by water. He just wanted to wave good-bye. John D. MacDonald’s character Travis McGee insists that the *Alabama Tiger* hosts the world’s longest permanent floating party. He obviously does not know Olivier.



Close to the madding crowd, Paris wakes to fumes, snarls, bent fenders and coffee splashing on silk ties. Olivier de Cornois, however, grins so wide you’d think he was crazed except for that glimmer which suggests he knows why he is smiling. “Ahhhh,” he says each morning to anyone close enough to hear, breathing deeply and showing an extra molar on either side of his grin, “the river.”

Scion to a sugar-aristocracy family from Picardy, Olivier fell for the river in 1970. “*J’ai flashé*,” he puts it. He’d been living in an apartment on the Rue Vavin in Montparnasse, studying drama, and fighting with his neighbors over loud parties; it is not clear whether the parties were theirs or his. But one night he went to a small orgy on a large boat and never looked back.

“My life has been paradise ever since,” he told me one morning, grinning that grin which suggests Captain Blood on the way to bury doubloons. He lives on a red runabout that bobs like a cork in a dishwasher anytime something serious churns past. He paints for the few odd francs, but lives, essentially, on nothing. The Seine is his only love, except perhaps for women of tender age, and for riding his motorbike while standing up on the seat.

Olivier is tall and spare, with a rugged, handsome face and a shag of curls. He yells endearments at passing women, the kind that get your arm broken in California, and a lot of the women seem to like it. One of them married him.

For a brief time, Olivier and his much-younger wife were a model of bourgeois bliss. They had a daughter and moved ashore. “You know, the bouncing, the tight space, it’s not so good for an infant,” he said at the time, as if trying to convince himself more than me. When I next saw him, his crazed grin had matured to a beatific beam. He explained to me how it felt to nurture a tiny girl, and his eyes watered.

A little later, a touch of rue flavored his smile. In his forties, he was finding it hard to boogy all night and change diapers in the morning. But he was trying. Then I went away for a long time and came back to find him living alone on the boat. He was almost the old Olivier again, up with a grin, a few turns around the quai standing up on the motorbike, and a sacred thoughtful hour on the park bench under the trees in the late afternoon. But not quite.

I asked no questions, but soon enough the news came. Olivier’s baby had died. His wife was with her family. He was back to his first love, the Seine.

At the time, Olivier was tied up behind me, next to a steel-hulled *péniche*. This is a 126-foot barge, the standard French workhorse. Its master is Philippe, a perfect neighbor who was not wild about my writing this book. When I told him the title, he recoiled: “But if you write about it, it’s not secret. Be sure to tell them about floods and leaks.” I resolved to spare his privacy, just as anyone aboard *La Vieille* is schooled not to see into his uncurtained windows. In France you can do it.

“Please understand if I do not seem to see you when we look at each other,” Philippe said when we first met. I loved him instantly. Two boats tied alongside are like Siamese twins, and I am no Rotarian. Imagine the perils of proximity. You cannot get to my boat without walking across the bow of Philippe’s. He can’t leave the quai unless I go first.

Carefully, like a couple of porcupines sharing a den, we found a happy symbiosis. I don’t sand my rails when he is sleeping in. He shrugs when I park my car on his hose during his shower. Every so often he comes aboard to dislodge debris about to tear off my port-side prop, a hazard I tend not to notice, and he mutters in English: “Unaware. Completely unaware.”

You never know. The other Sunday, he emerged blearily at 5 P.M., unwound six feet of hung-over party victim, wandered below to get my guitar, and announced, in G, “I’m a little red rooster.”

My neighbors began to settle along the quai in 1960s when few people lived on the Seine. By now, the old-timers know the river’s every mood and who sells the best rope and the cleanest fuel. One barge has a rose garden worthy of Versailles.

Depending on the season, early morning on the quai produces a trickle of joggers—once Madonna and goons trotted by—or a few diehard lovers or a Dutch camper

that sneaked through the gate. But you will always see Bernard, Captain Jacques's sidekick, and his burly German shepherd. Bernard will be in a greasy black seaman's cap and blue coveralls. The dog will be drooling.

Bernard was one of those *clochards* who live under the bridges, friendly trolls of a time-honored class of Parisian bums. In *Boudou Saved from Drowning*, a classic film about the river, Michel Simon plays a *clochard* who is saved from the Seine. Bernard, however, was saved by the Seine. One morning, Philippe gave him a few francs to clean up in front of his boat. Then another neighbor hired him, and so did someone else. Soon, Bernard had a steady job working for the port, and his bum days were behind him.

One of life's pleasures is a chat with Bernard as he leans on his broom or scratches his dog's ears. It's too bad I can understand only one in every ten words of his Gabby Hayes delivery.

A lot of characters along the river have only walk-on parts. Someone is always making a movie, or modeling underwear or uncorking a primal scream. It seems that a section of the Seine is reserved for every proclivity, and our quai is for lovers. Mostly, old-fashioned pairs stroll past. But one particular bench in the trees is noted for world-championship brazen coupling.

When I moved in, we even had a neighborhood swimming hole. This was the Piscine Deligny, a clean-water pool by the Quai d'Orsay where women displayed their breast implants and men showed each other most of their private parts. It was the last survivor of the *bateaux-bains*, floating pleasure spots that the Germans banished in 1942 as navigational hazards and needless frippery. For a century and a half, Parisians hurried to the sheet-metal beach, frolicked in the water, and ate lunch under umbrellas.

One morning in 1993, an hour before its scheduled yearly safety inspection, the Piscine Déligny sank like a stone. It had rested on three floating tanks, like barge hulls, linked by cable. For no apparent reason, the one nearest shore filled with water. Firemen could not detach the other two before the weight of the first capsized them. Immediately, the rumors flew: mafiosi did it; insurance played a part; someone was disgruntled at something. Paris lost its favorite swimming spot but gained a major mystery.



As the lyricists have it, Paris makes love to the Seine. At least, the city embraces its waterways like nowhere else on earth. New York ignores two rivers. London turns its back on the Thames. Comparisons with Venice are more than hyperbole. The Canal Saint-Martin loops deep into the Right Bank, carrying barges past chestnut trees and dramatic old landmarks to the Ourcq and Saint-Denis canals. From these, you see a Paris that most Parisians would swear vanished decades ago. There is the hulking Grands Moulins de Paris, which made the flour for bread no one could match. And the Hotel du Nord, which gave its name to another film classic. When Arletty leaned from a bridge and rasped to Louis Jouvet, "*Atmosphère, atmosphère . . .*," Parisians cried a river. The city's Grand Canal, the Seine itself, winds among parks and fancy mansions you reach by crossing water.

Venetian waterways are public thoroughfares, but their edges are jealously

guarded. Vaporetos carry gawkers past private landings and closed wooden doors. But you can get off a Parisian Bat-O-Bus at any stop and walk along like you own the quai. On the upper level, *les bouquinistes* offer best-sellers from the 1930s and travelogues of Timbuktu from open-air stalls. Down below, you can converse amiably with corn-fed tourists off the bus or play AIDS roulette with the rough trade. You'll hear French and English and Japanese, but also Catalan and Lapp and Dari.

On the Ile Saint-Louis or the Ile de la Cité, you can walk by the river and peer into mysterious worlds when someone swings open any of those massive double doors. At 17 Quai d'Anjou, for instance, Baudelaire and the *club des hashishins*—a play on *assassins*—met to smoke dope and plot the discomfiture of stuffy citizens. Rilke and Wagner and Delacroix were regulars; Hugo took a few hits and dropped off to sleep. Balzac didn't inhale.

Today's bohemians still gravitate to the river. So do most other Parisians. If most moored boats are people's homes or cargo haulers, and you approach uninvited on pain of death, others are there to be visited. Floating restaurants offer everything from tempura to tacos. By Notre-Dame, the *Metamorphosis* has been transformed from a sand barge to an Italian-style magic theater.

Down any quai, you can let your imagination run wild. Ask a few questions, and people are likely to misinform you about neighbors they hardly know. They guess by default; etiquette frowns on their prying in any obvious manner. Also, affairs are seldom as they seem. The Doges' Venice was straightforward as a Boy Scout troop next to a Seine-side boat community. People on the river by and large treasure their status as characters.



Among the Seine's colorful cast is *La Vieille*, that cranky but lovable aging matron with whom I spent a rough first night when I moved onto the river in July 1987.

*La Vieille* was built from Burmese hardwood and English hardware at the turn of the century as an admiral's gig for the Royal Navy. Driven by a steam engine, she plowed her deep V-shaped hull into heavy seas as flag officers potted about their fleets. Doubtless she had a rich, noble history: seamen rolling depth charges overboard at lurking U-boats, daring rescues in the North Sea, the Dunkirk evacuation—that sort of thing. Doubtless.

All I know is that after World War n, someone turned her into a motor yacht. She had lot of new names. The first was *Namouna*. Another evoked a port in Andalusia, an arid stretch of Spain not unlike my home country in Arizona. One of her names, I was told, meant "freedom" in Arabic. This appealed to me. When you can unplug a few lines and head toward anywhere in the world you have the fuel to reach, *Freedom* is a pretty good name to have painted across your fantail. But I prefer the nickname. *La Vieille*, like a lot of French terms, means whatever you want it to mean: the old bitch; your mother; or the woman you love.

The boat is fifty-four feet long and thirteen feet wide. Her hull of double teak planking over closely spaced ribs is solid as a mountainside. Deep below the wheelhouse lurk two BMC Commodore diesel engines, slightly modified versions of what powered London taxicabs in the 1950s. What used to be the engine room is a