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Essay by Edward Rutherfurd

I was eight when I fell in love with Paris. Though my family was British, we had many French cousins, and that year we all went over to Paris to see them.

There was the magical drive around floodlit Paris; the river trip, the walk down the Champs-Elysees. The smell of Gauloises cigarettes--now gone--and French coffee, the taste of real French cooking, a far cry from the food I knew. I took pictures from the top of the Eiffel Tower, and gazed in rapture at the Napoleonic army of toy soldiers in Les Invalides. And then there was the sound of my cousins speaking French--charming, sensuous, mysterious.

But it was something unexpected that impressed me most.

My French cousin Isabelle was driving me and my father's elderly aunt. By mistake, she made an illegal turn. The police pounced. Isabelle apologized. The policeman was stony-faced. Then Isabelle had an inspiration.

"You see, Monsieur, I was taking my aunt from England for a drive," she explained.

The policeman bent down, looked at the little old lady on the back seat, stood at attention and saluted. "Passez, Madame," he said gallantly.

We've all encountered occasional rudeness in France, but throw yourself on a French person's mercy, and their sense of chivalry usually kicks in. That's the special charm of France.

I stayed with my cousins often after that. One Parisian family lived just up the street from Proust's childhood home, and only yards from where the Statue of Liberty was constructed.

Others had an old house in Fontainebleau, with a veranda straight out of a Manet painting, and family stories that went back to Napoleonic times. Others lived near the Bastille, or in Hemingway's Montparnasse, or in the Latin Quarter--wonderfully convenient when, as a teenager, I needed to sneak into the revolutionary riots in 1968. All these places found their way into my novel.

The son of a laborer taught me street-fighting--my background for the Gascon family. I knew an old monarchist priest who still held the French kings sacred; an aristocrat who'd known Chagall, and a virulent Marxist student. I lived with professional families whose shared memories went back to the days of the Belle Epoque and beyond. These were the sources of my characters and stories.

And as a young man, I also fell in love in Paris, with an older woman, which left me with memories of Neuilly when the horse chestnuts are in blossom, and of walks in the Parisian dawn, and an old house with parquet floors that creaked, and the smell of fresh croissants and cafe au lait in the morning.

But if Marcel Proust found the past brought vividly back to life by the taste of a madeleine, I too have a taste and smell to share; of eating frogs legs at the age of eight, and being sick afterwards . . . I still can't bear the smell. I'll stick to the croissants and cafe au lait!