**Gwen Strauss**

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**A French Love Affair**

We live on a converted barge, a houseboat, on a canal, on the eastern edge of Burgundy almost in the Jura mountains, next to Switzerland. Driving to the closest town in our new, very old 1952 Peugeot 203 takes about fifteen minutes. Of course, in a newer car you'd get there faster—and I wonder, would the town seem more modern? Because when I'm in our car, I notice again that our village is full of old people, that the French countryside has been abandoned by the younger generations. When I pull into the gas station, or into the market place, inevitably an old French man will come running out of the nearby café. With pastis on his breath he'll exclaim, "C'est ma jeunesse!" Then he will moon over the dashboard. It's the same, the very same as the one he had as a young man! There will follow some discussion, mixed with patriotic disbelief, about how I, as a youngish American woman, got possession of this car. How could that be? they ask. I want to answer: by sheer pathological stupidity. But I just smile and shrug my shoulders and sigh a lot, "C'est comme ça."

The car has no key. You push in a button that connects the batteries and then you pull out another button that looks like a choke and the car coughs to a start, and then you quickly push that lever back in and pull out the real choke. Pump just the right amount of gas and set the choke at just the right point. If you fail at some point in the process to have just the right touch, the car floods and you have to sit for a while. But that's OK because there will be an old Frenchman there, only too happy to have a chance to tell you about his car that was just like this one. He drove it all the way to Prague when he was twenty with a friend, not "ma femme," he will say, winking at you.

Mostly, we travel by water. For land travel, we have four bikes and a moped. Our boat was built in 1926 in Holland, so we have plenty of things to repair already. Why do we need a car? Well, the idea was that since J. and I, (J. is my fiancé), were living out in the countryside all winter, with a car we could take little outings up into the Jura, go see a film in Dijon on the spur of the moment, go to the large market on Saturdays in Dole, or pick up visiting friends at the train station in St. Jean-de-Losne. And occasionally we could go to Paris.

The last time we were there, before we had a car, we went to the Museum of Natural History next to the Jardin des Plantes and looked at the exhibit in the Hall of Paleontology. It is an immense hall filled, as far as the eye can see, with bones and
strange animal body parts in jars of formaldehyde—a cat’s heart, a whale’s heart, and a human heart; or a giraffe’s tongue, a lizard’s tongue, and a bird’s tongue; a fish’s stomach; a man’s eye; an elephant’s inner ear; an eight-month-old human fetus brain; and there was a whole section of jars of testicles and penises—all dissected and labeled in minute handwritten calligraphy. Here again I felt we had run into that French contradiction, the mixture of Latin and Anglo-Saxon. Oil and vinegar. On the one hand there is a generous, hodgepodge free-for-all, and a total lack of prudery about the body, and on the other hand a strict love of Descartes and all things rational, with everything carefully catalogued and listed. The French love their camembert made with unpasteurized milk and they love their TGV fast train. The organic versus high technology. Anyway, we stayed in the hall until they kicked us out at closing, and we reasoned that if we had a car, we could come to Paris whenever we wanted and visit this exhibit as much as we wanted.

The car belonged to a friend who was in desperate need of money, on the very same day. I mentioned that we wanted to buy a car. Geoffrey was ecstatic—“Buy my car! She’s beautiful. She’s been sitting in a garage for two years but before that, she ran like a dream!”

Somehow he talked us into looking at the car. And then we did what is all too easy to do, with one look we fell in love with the idea of that car. I say this because I realize now the entire car folly is like a long reiteration of so many lessons I was supposed to have already learned. Lessons about how and what to love. Even though we are both rather impractical, we managed to see with open eyes that this was impractical and still we pursued the idea of that car with that kind of obsessive self-destruction that can be awakened only with certain kinds of love: when you love the idea of someone. You know he’s trouble, and all your friends tell you so, and still ... .

The car was built back in the days when they believed in the power of curves. When Beauty was a full-bodied woman, with hips and breasts. Our car is like that. It has large rounded front fenders that surge over the tires like shoulders and support, almost like offerings, beautiful owl-eyed headlights. It has a sleek domed hood that nestles between the two humps of fender. There are few sharp corners in this car. Slopes and domes fold into each other. The doors are rounded and open madly in the opposite direction. J. calls them suicide doors. The dashboard is shaped like a half moon. The line of the roof, which can slide open for a sun roof, arcs smoothly down to the rear fender. There is chrome detailing around both front and rear tire fenders. If you squint your eyes, you see this once was a magnificent car. I wonder how many families took their Sunday promenades with picnics in this car. I wonder how many passions were kindled, how many couples made love in this car. I wonder how many journeys, how many kilometers.

We have no way of knowing how many kilometers the engine has run because the meter reads 61,160. But that could be 161,160 or 261,160, or 361,160. . . . There is a great deal of rust, and though we are tempted and talk of painting her, it would be insanity, costing twice or three times the value of the car. You get the feeling that if you began sanding, the car might just fall apart, disintegrate into dust. The rust holds things in place with a tenuous fragile lace. The first day we had her, a large truck
passed us going in the opposite direction, and the force of the wind from the truck ripped something off the car. “What was that?” I exclaimed. “I don’t know, I think it was a headlight,” J. answered. It wasn’t the headlight, but the ring that held the headlight in place, that was completely rusted out. The headlight now sagged like an eyeball hanging from its socket. I was reminded of the jars of formaldehyde, the dismembered body parts.

The purchase of a car involves some basic formalities. There are insurance papers to get, and the contrôle technique to pass. The contrôle technique is the car inspection, the road test, and with one look we knew this car shouldn’t pass. But Geoffrey assured us, “They’re very lenient with old cars like this. It’s a Peugeot!” Meaning chances are the inspector will feel some stirring of sentiment when he sees the car and let it pass.

I call Monsieur Baillencourt, my insurance agent. I recently had a long conversation with him about insurance for our moped. The cheapest insurance for one year was already half the cost of the bike itself. This was bare bones insurance, no theft, no minor repairs—this was just the required insurance, covering damages I might cause with my moped to people or to any historical monument, like if I somehow destroyed an obelisk in the center of a roundabout. After much negotiating M. Baillencourt explained to me, my chosen profession was to blame. Writers are a great insurance risk. There was nothing he could do about it, c’est comme ça, it’s written into the code. Now if I could get a letter from the Department of Motor Vehicles in Florida where my driver’s license was issued stating that I was a safe driver, that I had never had an accident, that I had been driving for sixteen years, maybe he could do something. But the letter must be translated and notarized. I have been calling the department of Motor Vehicles for a month now. A week ago someone actually answered the phone, but we were disconnected suddenly and violently in mid-sentence. I haven’t been able to make contact again.

M. Baillencourt is much more amiable when he hears about the Peugeot 203. He had one in his youth. It was his first car. “What a car!” he says over the phone with the kind tone we usually reserve for reminiscences of old loves. We could insure it under the roisiture de collection clause, an antique collection car, meaning it would be used just for small trips, and not everyday. M. Baillencourt comes by the boat to deliver the insurance papers by hand. He wants to see the old car, could he have a look. Half of J.’s body is lost under her hood, as it is most days now, when I look out the window by my desk. So we stand, watching J. bang about on the car’s innards, and M. Baillencourt asks where I am with that letter from America. I explain to him that though he might think the French invented bureaucracy, the Americans have perfected it. What’s to be done, he asks, shrugging his shoulder. “C’est comme ça,” I say, as we sigh together in agreement. We’ve just had a moment. This is good, because in France the surest way to cut through bureaucracy is to develop a personal relationship with the person handling your affairs. If nothing else, this car has been the ice breaker between M. Baillencourt and me. He wishes us luck with the road test, if we ever get there, and I am reminded of the peculiar relationship the French have with exams and tests.

For one week a year, the whole country is paralyzed in paroxysms of anxiety while
high school students take their BAC exam, which will determine their entire future. The French with their love of rational guidelines use this system of immense pressure and conformity. And high school students know this is the moment they have been trained for. From an early age their grueling education trains them not to think on their own but to carefully bring forth and order in well-established patterns all the data they’ve been fed. Individual thought is discouraged; memorization, rote, and repetition are encouraged. There is a certain outline to be used in all essay questions, there is a certain outline to be followed in all oral exams. This must contribute to the creation of the fonctionnaire behind his boxed window who says, “Non, c’est impossible,” or “ça n’existe pas” to any question remotely out of the ordinary. If he has not seen, or heard, or done it before, it doesn’t exist, is impossible, and anyway it’s time for lunch. It will do you no good to try to reason with this stance—the high God of Reason brought them here in the first place. You would be better off using the opposite track, appealing to his Latin soul that loves a fine bottle of wine, a titillating flirtation.

Every culture is full of contradictions, just as each human being “contains multitudes.” And the energy of love is the dance of contradiction, the atoms that bounce off and attract each other. The French say, “vivre la différence,” maybe because they know that the difference between two people is what pulls them together, that is the mystery of love. Relationships are always a cross-cultural experience.

And just when I think the French soul is ordered like their public gardens—trees in neat rows, gravel, no grass—I am reminded that nothing is that simple. For the French, passionate love is the revolution that will tear down the Bastille of logic and reason. In love all is permitted. It is understood that love is chaotic by nature, all-consuming and irrational. Lovers kiss, no, devour each other, on the bridges over the Seine and the Parisians on their way to work, pass them with a sigh, “C’est l’amour.” They abandon themselves to love in a way that makes most Americans flush and feel the pointy finger of their Puritan soul prodding at them. I remember explaining to my first French boyfriend what “French kissing” means to an American. He was both amused and confused. How could we make such classifications? Of course, there is an obvious difference between the bisous everyone exchanges in greeting, those little pecks on the cheek, and the full-mouthed embraces of love. But once you are embracing your love, all distinctions blur, bodies blur, limits blur. In one swoop of emotion, the problem Descartes laid on all of Western philosophy to follow, with his mind/body separation, is brushed away. The French only chop off body parts and put them in jars when they are being scientific. When they are in love, they run headlong.

It made me wonder if we, as Americans, were being too hesitant about the car. I ask J. if maybe we haven’t quite abandoned ourselves to her. Maybe that is why, even before we’ve bought her, we’re already having so many problems. J. my good Anglo-Saxon man who has managed to get the engine to turn over, looks at me sternly and says, “Let’s see if she passes the road test first.”

The contrôle technique is quite a thorough process. They drive the car on large rollers and watch as the car is bandied about. J. said he almost couldn’t watch as the poor old thing squeaked and groaned and shimmied. The inspector has a high-tech panel
of dials and switches with which to measure the suspension or lack thereof. He was very lenient and did all he could to pass the car. When one of the headlights did not go on, he banged his fist on the fender, much as one would bang a Coke machine that has failed to drop your soda. His bang worked and he checked the light off on his list. But even with his nudging, he couldn’t pass her.

Problems discovered during inspection can be classified in one of three categories. First, there is the mild observations which require no repair. This is more for a new buyer to know what might be a future problem. In this category the inspector wrote mildly: rust in the rear frame, and rust in the rear and the front of the body.

The next category is Défaut(s) à corrigier sans obligation d’une contre-visite, defaults to be fixed that do not require a follow-up visit. A Frenchman understands that this means you don’t really have to fix these things, but if you have an accident and it turns out that you hadn’t fixed these things . . . In his leniency, I feel the inspector tried to put most everything under this category. License plates: bad condition. Frame: rust and holes, right and left. Frame: cracks and breaks, front and back. Suspension in rear: uneven by more than 30 percent. Steering wheel: too much play. Gear shift: too much play. Motor: an oil leak. Floor: rust and holes both back and front. Windshield wipers: bad condition.

Finally there is the category that demands immediate attention, défaut(s) à corrigier avec obligation d’une contre-visite. You have two months to fix these problems and come back for the last visit, otherwise you have to begin the whole process again. There are three things listed in this category: the parking brake needs work, the blinkers need to be made to conform to the rules, and only one rear brake light is working.

The blinkers, or turn signals, are an interesting problem. The car was not built with blinking lights for turn signals. Instead, there are little metal flags, like the flags one might find on mailboxes, that pop out of slots on the side of the car, indicating which way you plan to turn. On the top of the dashboard there is a toggle switch that works these flags. They pop out like ineffectual wings, like an ostrich’s wings. When Geoffrey first brought the car over, he demonstrated the flags for us, and J. noticed smoke spiraling from the slot. Geoffrey said, “Oh, it’s always been like that.” But on closer inspection J. noticed that the wiring had come loose and was actually sparking and almost shorting out against the frame of the car. Maybe it was best to just disconnect the flags, since the rules are clear on this: we must install blinking lights.

After our failure at the contrôle technique we call up Geoffrey. We say we can’t buy the car until it passes. Why don’t we just fix these minor problems ourselves, Geoffrey asks. He knows we can do it. Besides, if we take it to a garage it could cost a fortune. As I’ve said, we live on a boat. We converted the boat ourselves, one harrowing year in Amsterdam. Besides building the walls, floors, cabinets, shelves, windows, and doors, we installed plumbing, electricity, heating, hydraulic steering, etc., etc., etc. We hated it. We look back on that year much as one would look back on one of those short-term disastrous relationships, when, after enough time has passed, you can actually chuckle and say to yourself, “Never again.”

We are, neither of us, joyful mechanics, or as they say here, bricoleurs: do-it-yourself enthusiasts. We can do it, and on a boat you end up doing it, constantly. I find now,
after three years on the boat, I have become amazingly handy. But we have to be
dragged, kicking and screaming, towards repairs. J. says he’s not a mechanic but then
in the next breath he’ll say, “I was noticing it shouldn’t be too hard to remove the
fuel tank, clean it out, and reinstall that meter with new gaskets.” We are impractical
people. We have not learned a vital lesson, which is how to pay others to do what you
don’t want to do yourself. But we’re learning.

We win this battle with Geoffrey, sort of. He cuts his asking price in half. We take
the car to the garage. Two weeks later we pick up the car and pay exactly the half that
Geoffrey cut off the price. The mechanic did not include tax or labor when he quoted
his price to us over the phone. J. is angry. He could have done it himself. Still, we
are so close! We only have to go for a contre-visite. I’ve scheduled a rendez-vous for
six that evening. But just as we are leaving town the car sputters, it surges and strains.
Obviously a fuel problem. Geoffrey did mention there was rust in the fuel tank that
needed to be removed. J. looks at the fuel filter, it’s a clogged mess. I cancel our
rendez-vous. The next day is spent looking for new filters. But then the problem is
more than just filters: the whole carburetor is clogged. J. spends the rest of the day
cleaning out the entire fuel line, filters, and carburetor. I point out that this is a worse
job than some wiring. Wiring is clean and odorless. We should have paid the garage
to do this and done the wiring part ourselves.

Then almost as if the car heard me mention that we could do wiring ourselves,
something happens that night. J. notices that the brake lights work fine when the
headlights are off, but when they are on, when you push the brakes, all the lights
go off.

OK, it’s getting spooky, almost vindictive. J. mentions that back in the days when
the flags were still connected he noticed when he turned left, just slightly, following
the curve of the road, sometimes the left flag popped out. He decides to bite the bullet
and look at the wiring under the steering post. It’s a huge medusa mess. Undoubtedly
there’s a short circuit, all kinds of shorts happening in there. A regular family feud,
icest wiring. A can of worms. Pandora’s box.

I think we ought to have a name for the car. I remember from that movie The Gods
Must Be Crazy the man called his car the Anti-Christ. Geoffrey said he called the car
Harold, but I feel the car is too womanly for a male name. J. does not want to name
the car, or at least he’s hesitant. Naming implies commitment. Naming is an act of
love, much more powerful than cleaning a carburetor or rewiring a light. I secretly
begin to think of the car as Mary, as in Marilyn Monroe. A combination of that older,
more graceful kind of beauty, mixed with suffering and despair.

Geoffrey calls late that night. We have guests onboard, and we’re drinking some
c RSSLolland wine, so I don’t really think about what he’s saying to me until
later. He completely forgot to get a new vignette for the car. And tomorrow is the
absolute deadline, the last day possible to get it. You just have to go to a tabac, or
tobacconist, but unfortunately the tabac has to be in the county where the car is
registered which is in the Yonne, several counties to the west. About 300 kilometers
away. The vignette is a sticker you have to get each year and stick to your windshield.
Everyone in France has to get the next year’s vignette in November. It’s a form of
road tax. Because Mary is so old she has actually been exonerated from paying any road tax. Her vignette is free, but obligatory. I can’t believe I have to drive all the way to Auxerre just to go to a tabac for a free sticker.

The next day, Sunday, I go to the local tabac. There is a long line of men holding their carte-grise, or car papers. Everyone has waited until the absolute last day. Other people come and go buying cigarettes or lottery tickets, while our line moves at a snail’s pace. Each tax has to be calculated separately as each person pays a different amount depending on the year and make and size of the car. Finally it's my turn. The man stares at my carte-grise. “Non,” he says, “C’est impossible. C’est cinquante-deux!” Yes, I assure him the car was built in 1952. Well, then I don’t have to pay, it’s free. I’ve been exonerated, he tells me triumphantly. But I still must have a vignette. And he does not have that type of vignette, the exonerated kind. I have to go to the Town Hall in Suerre (not nearly as far away as Auxerre) but since it’s Sunday I have to wait until Monday, and then I’ll be too late. We discuss what to do about this. He thinks they can’t fine me for being late if the vignette is free, but I’m not so sure. Other people in the line join in with their opinions. One old man exclaims, beaming with joy, that he had that very same car when he was just a boy. He asks me if the turning flags still work. I disappoint him by telling him we had to disconnect them for the contrôle technique. “Ah! C’est comme ça.” The tobacconist offers to give me a piece of paper full of stamps proving that I tried to get the vignette before the deadline. He has a nice army of rubber stamps. One of them is the stamp for Lotto, the national lottery. He uses them all.

J. thinks he can fix the brake light anomaly and spends all of Sunday with pliers and wire and electrical tape. But by Sunday night, I find him laying prone with his stomach on the floor of the main cabin in what can best be described as a stupor. He has the brake light bulb in one hand and a small battery in the other. He makes a contact with the battery, the bulb lights, he moves his hand, it turns off. On. Off. On. Off. On. Off. He doesn’t hear me. I watch him do this for a solid minute.

We are now in that stage of a love affair when you feel sorrow down to your bones because you know you must end it, and you know you don’t have the heart to do it. You are sad and in love. It’s going to end badly, you see this clearly. But you keep thinking, maybe they’ll change, maybe we can work it out, maybe it’s worth one more try. You keep up a brave front. You gaze at the other for long moments with overwhelming tenderness. You are beginning to prepare yourself, to accept failure as your fate.

And yet, in the morning light that old flame is there. We’re so close, J. can’t give in. It’s turning into a stubborn-pride thing. Like in those relationships when each person is waiting the other person out. Neither one wants to be the one to lift and swing the ax.

What amazes me about this process is how clear it all is. It’s that old adage: you can only learn by experience, and sometimes by experiencing it over and over again. Even when we tell ourselves it’s folly, we cannot stop ourselves. We must experience the actual self-inflicted suffering of folly. And I thought I had grown beyond this stuff.

I speak to a friend on the phone. He’s in New York. He says, “You what? A car that

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was built in 1952? Drive it into the canal! Right now! Hang up and drive it into the canal! Look, I thought you were crazy to buy a barge and live on it, but I supported you. But this time, this time I have no sympathy.” His tone of voice reminds me of all the times over the years I’ve called him about one love affair or another. He’s been a good friend. He’s listened to the stories, the dashed hopes, the obvious non-starters. He warns me that this car will be worse than all of those past love affairs, worse even than a teenager. You have to give it unconditional love even when you catch it smoking, he says, or even when it refuses to do what you want it to do, like drive. I know, I know. We change the subject. He wants to talk about the wedding plans. He likes J., and I think I detect a note of amazement in his voice that I have actually decided to marry the right one. It’s a beautiful winter’s day. High deep blue skies, a crisp biting cold. The surface of the water is ruffled in gusts of wind. Outside the window, on the bank, I see J.’s legs dangling from underneath the steering wheel; he’s meditating on her esoteric wiring.

Last night we were selling Mary to the Peugeot garage. This morning J. rode his bike into town for more parts. “Let’s just try once more,” J. said to me this morning, as he kissed me on the forehead. I am heartened that the man I will marry does not quit easily. L’amour, c’est comme ça.