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Ooh La La!

FRENCH WOMEN'S SECRETS
TO FEELING BEAUTIFUL
EVERY DAY



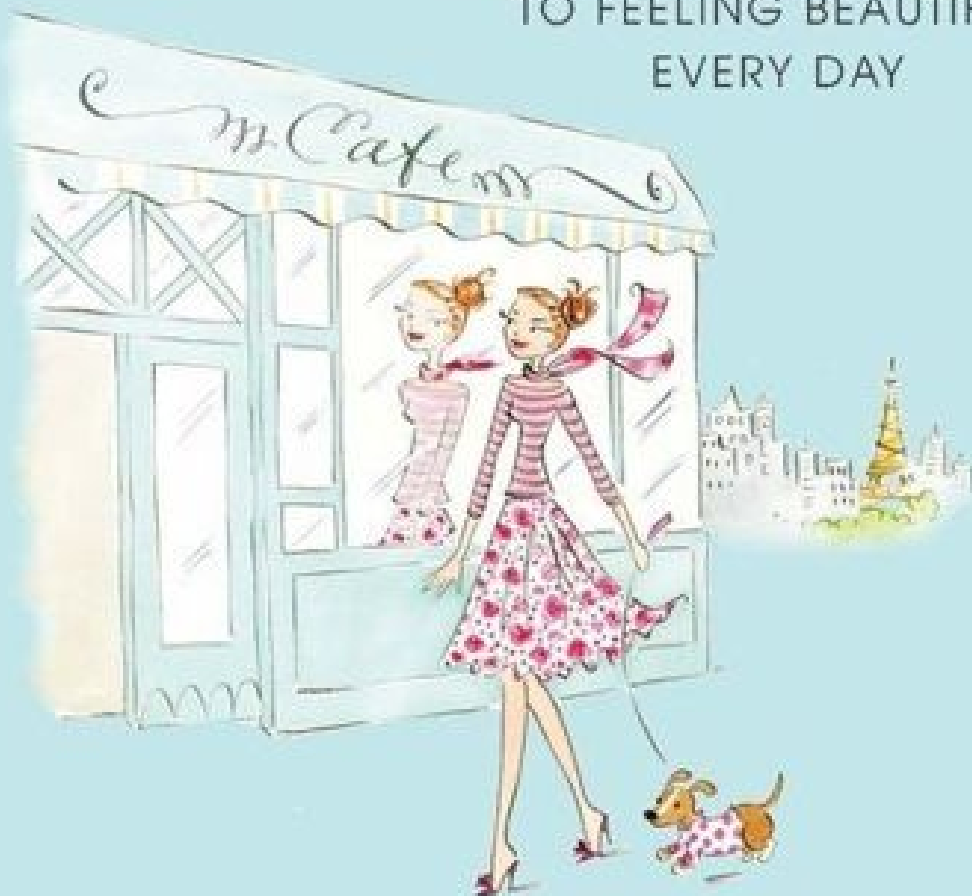
JAMIE CAT CALLAN

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ALSO BY JAMIE CAT CALLAN

French Women Don't Sleep Alone

Bonjour, Happiness!

Ooh La La!

FRENCH WOMEN'S SECRETS TO FEELING BEAUTIFUL EVERY DAY

JAMIE CAT CALLAN



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Let us leave pretty women to men with no imagination.

—MARCEL PROUST

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Prologue

A FUNNY THING happened on the way to writing this book.

Well, actually, maybe not so funny. But certainly, *interesting*.

One lovely autumn evening, as I was stepping out to have dinner with friends in Toulouse, encountered a very large cobblestone. The pointed toe of my shoe got caught underneath it, and with my foot trapped there, I slipped and twisted my ankle, this way and then that. And just as an aside—I was not wearing high heels. The pain was so intense I immediately passed out. When I came to, my friends were kneeling beside me and I could hear the sounds of the French ambulance careening down the narrow street to fetch me. I was lifted onto a stretcher and rushed to the local hospital, where I ended up staying for nine days at which point my husband who had been in Australia on a scientific research trip came to France to get me and bring me home. As it turns out I had broken my ankle in two different places and I needed major surgery. I am now the proud owner of an ankle that contains a metal plate and six screws inserted into it.

So you see, when I do something, I don't do it halfway.

With all those hours lying in bed—much of it spent on morphine—I had plenty of time to contemplate the secrets of French women.

I had spent the previous month traveling around France, interviewing French women—some close friends, some acquaintances, and some whom I had just met for the specific purpose of writing this book; by the time I ended up in the hospital, I still had not yet quite cracked the code on the secret to a French woman's allure. I had all the pieces, but I still had not quite put the puzzle together. Something was still missing.

And so, lying there in the hospital bed, my left leg hoisted up, staring out the window at the blue blue skies of Toulouse, pondering the clouds, I began to dream about my French grandmother. As a child, I often spent my summers with her. We would sit on her porch, drinking her lemony iced tea while my grandfather worked in the garden. And in the late afternoons, she insisted I take a nap. I still remember lying down on the living room sofa with a couple of pillows behind my head while my grandmother would wordlessly lower the shades, blocking out the noonday sun, throwing a soft shadow across the room. She would whisper that I should try to sleep, and then she would leave. I had no choice but to stay still and stare up at the little framed picture on the wall in front of me. Even today, this picture looms large in my memory. Perhaps you've seen it. It's a print called *Le Moulin Rouge* from an oil painting by the artist Guy Dess-apt. In the picture, it's a snowy evening on the streets of Paris. Today, Parisians still sell this print to the tourists strolling along the Seine's Left Bank. But to me, as a child, it was quite special. I remember lying there, trying to stay awake, while focused on all the details. There's the famous red windmill outside the dance hall and a sign announcing MOULIN ROUGE in lights. As my eyes became heavy and just before wandering off to dreamland, I began to imagine what happened inside that theater. Certainly, there would be dancing. Pretty women, of course. Feathers. Sequins. Bright lights. Oh, and music! A spectacular show every night of the week. I should mention here that my grandparents and my mother and uncle were in a Vaudeville troupe during the Great Depression. Perhaps this is why the picture of the Moulin Rouge captivated me so much. In fact, after a month in France, I came to believe that this picture was an important clue when it came to discovering my own *ooh la la*.

Now, I'm not saying that you're going to find your *ooh la la* staring at a picture of the Moulin Rouge or even from a trip to France. You might find your *ooh la la* on a farm in Kansas or while playing the piano, or a game of tennis. Then again, your *ooh la la* might be waiting for you in a shop out at sea or in the middle of downtown Chicago or in a classroom in Japan. Maybe your *ooh la la* is in a garden or at a library.

For me, at age fifty-eight with a grown-up daughter and newly remarried, I did discover my *ooh la la* in France, but it took some effort and perhaps even breaking my ankle to truly see that it had been standing right in front of me all along.

It took gallivanting around Paris, traveling to the north of France as far up as the Belgian border through parts of Normandy, spending time in the city of Rouen where Joan of Arc spent her final days and then through the south to the little village of Auvillar and the big city of Toulouse—all in an effort to discover why French women have this reputation for being so mysterious and sexy and beautiful and confident.

I learned about perfume, skin care, style, fashion, lingerie, and makeup.

However, I also learned about a lot of things that simply cannot be distilled into little beauty tips—for example, *always spritz your face in the evening with Evian*. (Although one French friend of mine swears by this, and she does have lovely skin!)

Rather, after all these interviews and meetings, I began to realize that there is something deeper about the French woman's beauty and elegance and mystery. And this something goes beyond fashion tips and beauty makeovers. So yes, while I learned some great ideas about how to keep your skin glowing, how to choose a signature fragrance and how to find the perfect accent color for you (all included in the book), I also learned about something deeper and much more elusive. And something beyond mere physical beauty. I like to call it *ooh la la*.

We've all heard this expression *ooh la la*! It originated in France in the 1920s and now many Americans have adopted it as a way of saying that something is chic or sexy or fun or just plain wonderful. And while I started off writing a book about French beauty, I soon realized that the real reason many of us find French women so captivating and fascinating is not merely because they are beautiful, but because of something deeper.

Through all my research and note taking, I came to realize that the French woman's true allure comes from the fact that she obviously feels total permission to be completely herself. Still, this is not something you can find in a bottle or in a cream or at a sample sale. It's not something you can get from an injection or from a filler or even from a lift. It's something that you cultivate and develop during a lifetime. It involves patience and courage and love and lots of imagination. Ah, but here's the great news about *ooh la la*—it's available to any woman (whether you live in Boston or Brazil, whether you're rich or poor, whether you've traveled the world or never left your own backyard). In fact, it's available to any woman who wants to break away from the pack and be her own uniquely beautiful self.

Once you read this book, it is my hope that you will begin your own search for *ooh la la*, and that the stories here will help inspire you on your particular journey. It is my aim that the French women's secrets I've revealed here will open doors inside your own heart, so that you may find the courage and the love to be your most authentic self—your best self. Your happiest, wisest, sexiest, and most beautiful and generous self.



CHAPTER ONE

You Had Me at Bonjour

How many cares one loses when one decides not to be something, but to be someone.

—COCO CHANEL

IT IS A WARM September day and I am in Paris, waiting in the reception area for my friend Isabelle. Isabelle is only in her late twenties, but this gal is wise beyond her years.

I sit on a little couch with a good view of the elevators and stairs, so I get to observe the French men and women, coming and going. Even from this very superficial viewpoint, it's obvious that French professionals—or at least Parisian professionals—dress up more than Americans do. There doesn't seem to be a *casual Friday*, which has turned into a *casual all-week-long*. Still, I will say this, there are women wearing jeans, but they are stylish and well tailored, and the women add a cute blazer, a silk blouse, and always a scarf. Mostly, I see lots of skirts paired with boots. The skirts graze the knees so you catch just a glimpse of textured stockings. It's pretty, elegant, and intriguing.

Before long, Isabelle arrives. I stand to greet her, and in one simple sweep, she gently touches my shoulder and turns her head quickly this way, and then that, for the *bises*. The French greeting—the kiss on each cheek. *Hello, Jamie!* she says happily. She pronounces my name *Jeemmee* and it sounds so pretty, dressed up in this French accent, that I don't have the heart to correct her. She loves practicing her English with me and so for now, I am *Jeemmee*.

As we gather our things, I notice that Isabelle looks very different from the last time I saw her. She's cut her hair shorter and she now has gold highlights. On our Métro ride to her condo outside Paris in Boulogne-Billancourt, Isabelle tells me all about Madame Josie Mermet. Isabelle recently had a “re-imaging” session with her at the department store Printemps, and she tells me that Josie has changed her life!

It's true—since I last stayed with Isabelle, she has indeed been truly transformed. Yes, her hair is shorter and the highlights are beautiful, but more than this, Isabelle is happier. *It's not just superficial color-analysis*, Isabelle tells me as we walk into her apartment.

Isabelle brings out a little pot of herbal tea and a plate of what she calls biscuits, and continues. *Josie Mermet reads your soul. She understands who you are meant to be in this world. It's very deep*. Isabelle hands me the little cup and saucer and turns to me. *Oh, and she's old, so she's got all that experience*. This statement I find particularly delicious. I am about twenty-five years older than Isabelle and suddenly feel so appreciated. It's not simply that this French woman is teaching me things, but I suppose I can teach her things. Even if I am American! After all, I have *experience!*

Isabelle puts her teacup down and continues. *She told me I must mix the styles up so my personality shows. And she says I have a pretty face and I need to show it. She does chromopsychology. Jeemmee, you have to meet her!*

Isabelle goes to her desk and takes out a folder with lots of paper and drawings. While she does this I bite into the biscuit and realize it's not a biscuit or a cookie. It's a cracker. Hmm . . . it's not sweet

but it's tasty.

~~*This is my chromopsychology*, Isabelle says, sitting down next to me and showing me a drawing and color swatches. *The stylist told me I need to wear more earth tones. Rust colors, warm browns, and golds.* Isabelle glides her hand through her silky brunette hair. *See?* And I do—it's lovely and the touch does bring out her eyes.~~

As I look around Isabelle's apartment, I see how all this makes sense. She has lots of posters of wolves (she tells me she loves wolves), but also there's an Indian print bedspread pinned to one wall and a poster of dolphins swimming with the words LIVE FREE in English and another poster with a photograph of a beach and palm trees in the orange light of sunset. The apartment's décor is awash in browns and golds and deep greens. Clearly, she's a gal who loves nature and the great outdoors.

I look at the drawings from her chromopsychology session. Each one features a line drawing of a heart-shaped-face woman. There are colors applied to her lips, cheeks, and eyes, and little notes on the side with names of specific colors and products. At first glance, I think this is a typical beauty makeover with color analysis, but I see that it is so much more. Josie Mermet sketches out clothing styles, haircut, and color, accessories that not only compliment a woman's skin or body type, but also her personality. She bases her recommendations on the woman's background, her childhood, her preoccupations, and her dreams for the future. Isabelle tells me that there are thirty types and that she is a "granite." Josie told her that she likes to help others. Certainly, that's true, I think as she pours up more tea. Outside the sun is setting.

I'm Aries with Libra rising, Isabelle says, showing me lists of makeup, types of handbags that would suit her personality, bijoux, belts, shoes, scarves, handbags. And then there's a list, "Ten Things You Should Have in Your Wardrobe," with the suggestion that Isabelle should dress more romantically and combine leather with softer, more flowing fabrics. And again, I can see how this will be perfect for her.

Isabelle turns to me and says with great passion, *Jeemmee, you must meet Josie Mermet. She will help you with your book.* And I agree. I must meet this Madame Josie Mermet and I must learn all about this chromopsychology business!

And so, phone calls are made and appointments confirmed. I am going to meet Josie at her office on the Right Bank, not far from the famous department store Printemps.

But first I must get to the appointment, which is not easy, because I must make several switches on the Métro—going from the dark yellow line on the Left Bank to the light purple line to Invalides and then getting off there and switching to the bright green line, which takes me to Hausman Saint-Lazare on the Right Bank. I'm being very specific about the colors because there are three different shades of green, and the route depends on the color of the Métro line, plus what direction you're going in. Oh, and the routes have numbers, too! Truthfully, it's all very circuitous, this French Métro system, and I always feel as if my brain is getting a great workout—a wordless exercise in following routes that begin and then split up and then split again, with me dashing around and around through the brightly tiled corridors, feeling a little bit like I'm inside a pinball machine, spinning around and around. And then after much stair climbing up and down, with colorful billboards advertising perfumes and plays and the latest collection at Galleries Lafayette, and going around and around some more, I am finally spit out at my destination. Still, I confess—I love riding the Métro!

And now, here I am on this perfectly sunny day, standing in front of the window of a Francis & Taylor Rhod, Haute Coiffure Française on rue Taitbout, staring at my own reflection into a hair salon. The girls in the salon stare back at me as if to say *who is this American standing outside the salon staring*

at us through the window? I check my little notebook. Yes, I have the correct address. And then I see in the corner of the window, a little sign that Josie Mermet does her re-imaging consultations here. I am in the right place after all, and so I enter the salon and tell the receptionist that I am here to interview Madame Mermet. She asks me to wait on a white leather sofa. She offers me a glass of mineral water. I accept it. After about ten minutes, another woman approaches me, speaking softly in English with a heavy French accent. She tells me she is Celine, Madame Mermet's assistant, and that she will now bring me to meet Madame. This assistant, Celine, is really gorgeous. She has very short cropped platinum blond hair with dark roots. It's all very cool, but very subtle. She wears a shimmering steel-gray knee-length dress that skims her slender frame. But what I really notice are her shoes—silver laced-up oxfords. And then I see she's wearing silver bangles, and even though her hair is blond it's got this silvery tint to it and I feel as if this girl might suddenly grab my hand and insist I dance the Charleston with her.

But rather than dancing, I quickly follow her down a spiral staircase. There is always a spiral staircase in France. No matter where you go, at some point in your day, you will be walking up or down a spiral staircase. Celine smiles and says something to me about waiting there—all I hear is *attendez*—and then she is gone, disappearing behind a black velvety curtain. And then, I am seated on another white leather sofa and asked to wait.

Just as I am wondering about what's behind those curtains, they open to reveal—Madame Mermet. She is a tiny woman, dressed all in black—black straight jeans, a black top, a black jacket—it's all a bit androgynous, but very sleek and tailored. And her hair—it is jet black and cropped in this very short stylish bob. But what really gets me is her bright red-lipsticked mouth, which is very full and glossy—outlined in black lipliner. Yes, her look is a bit startling, but you know what—it's also fantastic.

I catch my breath and stand up to greet her. She kisses me on each cheek and speaks so very softly and so sweetly, that for a moment I am reminded of Michael Jackson.

This thought doesn't have time to penetrate my brain, because Celine is holding the curtain open for us, waiting for me to come inside. I follow the two women into a small room with three red Louis XIV-style chairs arranged in a little circle. I sit down between Josie and Celine. I try to resist staring at Josie, but it's not easy. She has an incredibly dramatic look—yes, there's the red-lipsticked mouth outlined in black, but also she has gorgeous hazel eyes, outlined in black kohl, and her eyebrows are force in and of themselves. She has a beauty mark beneath her right eye. Honestly, I cannot take my eyes off her. For such a tiny woman, she has an incredibly commanding presence.

Nonetheless, I compose myself, get out my little moleskin notebook, and flip open to a blank page. I begin asking questions. Lots of questions.

Madame Mermet tells me that she began her *re-looking* work thirty years ago. For a time, she worked exclusively with L'Oreal and traveled all over the world for them, doing makeovers. She took this knowledge and experience and combined it with morphopsychology, which is the study of personality based on body type. From here, she created her own specialty, which she calls *chromopsychology*.

Here's how it works—at first, Madame Mermet just looks at the woman who's come into the office for a makeover. The client is not allowed to talk or ask questions. She is asked to stand, walk, stand again, and sit. Madame simply observes the woman's bone structure, her hair texture, her complexion as well as her morphopsychology—her body shape, her way of walking in and out of the room, and how she presents herself. I ask Madame why her clients are not allowed to ask questions, and she responds as if this is obvious. *I work intuitively*, she says, *I make you more you*. And then, she explains that her work is based on the woman's true personality, and truly seeing this authentic self is crucial

understanding the colors, shapes, and textures that will make her shine. And this includes not just your clothing, hair, and makeup, but your home and office space, along with your jewelry and your eyeglasses. *Even the color of your car is important*, she pronounces. *The right color can give you a different spirit!*

I ask Madame Mermet about her childhood and how her passion for helping women find their true selves began, and she tells me that she grew up in Chaumergy, a little village in Franche-Comté. As a little girl, Madame Mermet noticed that her two older sisters who were just one year apart looked so different from her. One had copper-colored hair and another was a blonde. And even her mother, she explains to me, had a different sensibility. But as a little girl, Josie who was petite and dark had to wear the hand-me-down dresses from her taller, blonder sisters, which meant wearing clothes that did not suit her at all. As she grew into her teen years, she became more aware of the differences. She experimented with a variety of looks by going through the fashion magazines and cutting up the pictures to create her own paper dolls. She would take one model and switch her face with another model's face and do the same with their bodies, clothing, shoes, bags, and accessories, rearranging all these elements to find the perfect, most pleasing, and natural sensibility.

I take notes and Madame Mermet begins talking very quickly. Celine must help with translating. Celine has been with her for over eighteen years and has the highest respect for this amazing woman. I must admit, I, too, am falling under her spell. The truth is, I would like to get her advice on what I should do—even to walk out the door understanding what type I am would be thrilling. I know I'm not a "granite," like Isabelle. She told me that Madame Mermet is a "dramatique," and I know I'm probably not that type. Well, actually, maybe I'm a little "dramatique," but certainly not in the style of Madame Mermet. And in this moment, I am feeling very American, and of all the thirty different types, I wonder if there's a type for me. I have this sinking feeling that perhaps I am no type at all.

And then, suddenly—as if reading my mind—Madame Mermet pronounces: *We respect the differences!*

She is looking directly into my eyes.. Honestly, I feel as if she is reading my mind and so I have to ask—what about body issues? Really, meaning, what if a woman is not slender? *What do you say to women about diet and exercise?* I ask. *Is that part of chromopsychology?*

And she tells me that with chromopsychology they do not talk about weight, but often a woman who needs to lose a few kilos will lose them without much effort because after her makeover, she receives so many compliments and she is in alignment with her true self, she is simply inspired to be as healthy and beautiful as possible.

But what if she has some obvious flaw? I continue. *And she's not what our world considers beautiful?* And here is where Madame Mermet gets very passionate. Her eyes grow wide and fiery and they actually seem to change from goldish-brown to green. She straightens her back, which is amazing because her posture is already impeccable, but suddenly this diminutive woman grows taller and for a fraction of a second, I see Madame Mermet as a little girl in the country, holding her head high as she suffered the indignity of being made to wear her blond sisters' pink-and-pastel-colored hand-me-downs.

We transfer the handicap and make it an asset! she tells me. And then she waves a tiny hand in the air and tells me, *we fight against the beauty norm! It kills originality and beauty!*

I confess I am flustered for a moment. This is not what I am after, really. I want to hear the French secrets to beauty. I want a list of the top ten magical beauty tricks that will be the key to opening the door to all that French *je ne sais quoi*, and this is when she declares—*There is not one standard of beauty!* And I honestly feel as if she is looking straight into my heart.

By the time I pack up my little notebook and gather up my purse and camera, bid my farewells and walk up that spiral staircase once again, I leave with the distinct feeling that I have just begun a very long, but wonderful journey in which I will be changed forever.

When you're in the presence of someone who truly knows exactly who they are in this world—it's completely thrilling. I've often felt this when I meet an excellent actress. I belonged to a theater workshop years ago, and while I was there to write plays, a director came up to me as the evening was ending and we were all going home. She stopped me and gave me the once-over. She mistook me for an actress and immediately launched into advice on what roles I should go out for. *You're not the star*, she said, scrutinizing my face, my body, my hair, my clothes, even my cute red ballet flats. *No, you're the quirky next-door neighbor. You're the funny one.* Now, this might sound like some kind of insult, but the moment the director said this, I felt the basic truth in it. I *am* the quirky next-door neighbor. I don't even want to be the perfectly beautiful star. That just doesn't sound like all that much fun anyway, if you want to know the truth.

Now, I have no intention of getting a job on a television sitcom, but I wonder if this director's way of looking at a woman is not completely dissimilar to what Madame Josie Mermet does. I wonder if we could help ourselves by looking in the mirror as if we were a director and asking ourselves—what role should that woman in the mirror play? Is she dark and brooding? Sweet and funny? Brilliant and complicated? Where would you place her? In the mountains, hiking? In a pool in Los Angeles? On a desert island? In a big city? And what would we tell the costume department? Oh, and while we're at it—is she in a contemporary scene or should she be placed in the 1920s wearing a fringed flapper dress?

I know that this line of questioning can't replace a trip to Paris and a session with the brilliant Josie Mermet, but I do think it's a beginning.

French Lessons

Find a mentor. This may be easier in a service-oriented society such as France, but it's still possible in America. True, in America we tend to be rugged individualists and so we're more of a self-service society. I know for myself, I don't always trust salesladies, and I have more than a few friends who feel the same way. (Although, I make an exception with Nordstrom's—those gals are very helpful!) Still, I think we're a little suspicious of salespeople who want to help us pick out something as simple as a new lipstick. I think this is because we worry that they're just trying to sell us something—anything—and they don't really care about getting to know what's right for us (which is another way of saying what's special about us) because well—that salesgirl or waiter or beauty adviser is not in it for the long run. While they're describing the benefits of some new skincare product, they are really thinking about how they'll skip out by five o'clock so they can make it to the audition for America's Next Top Model. And once their Hollywood ship comes in, it's so long beauty counter!

And so, as Americans, I think we often go it alone in terms of our beauty needs. This is not the case for French women. For them, it's all about finding the right person—a mentor—someone who will guide them through the intricacies of discovering their own unique look and style. Yes, French women are just like us—they read the latest fashion and beauty magazines—but it's more important for them to find that one woman—that expert mentor who can truly help them achieve the look that is unique and right for them.

In addition to all this, the French women I interviewed are very big on things like aura cleansing, visiting psychics, and even the Tarot. Not just for their future love lives or career paths, but for beauty and style advice. I'm not suggesting we should all run out and buy a pack of Tarot cards and dabble in the occult, but here's what I think is interesting and what I learned from Josie Mermet—French women's notion of beauty starts with their psychic selves. And from there, they tune into their personalities, their uniqueness, and even the knowledge of what they are meant to do in this lifetime and who they are meant to be. Then, with this foundation, they decide whether glossy pink lipstick is going to look good on them or perhaps they should wear more crushed velvet and then again, perhaps they need to cut their hair very short and dye it jet-black and wear black skinny jeans with a red mouth outlined in black lipliner.

So, here's your French lesson—find a mentor. You can start by enlisting the help of a trusted friend or a sister, your mother or your grandmother. Find someone who “gets” you and wants only the best for you. Find a woman you can trust. Next, find a makeup artist who you can go to for advice that is specific to your personality. Find a hairdresser who understands your hair type and your unique style. Oh, and whenever you visit your hairdresser or beauty adviser or personal shopper, dress up. Be the person you want to become—even if it feels as if you are playing a role. This way, you will send out the message to the world about your truest self, and you will open the door to become the woman you were always meant to be.

Finally, look at yourself as if you were a director, casting for parts in a new movie. Now, consider what role you'd like to play on this stage called life. And then, be the star.

Or the quirky next-door neighbor, if you like!



CHAPTER TWO

Am I Blue?

Colors, like features, follow the changes of the emotions.

—PABLO PICASSO

MICHELINE TANGUY has asked me to meet her at her favorite café in the Marais—a historic neighborhood in Paris known for its art galleries, trendy restaurants, and chic little shops. Micheline has chosen this particular café so that we can practice the French sport of *Le Regard*, or as we Americans call it, people watching. She has promised me that together we will deconstruct the French look and uncover exactly what makes the French woman so alluring. So, I take the Métro and get off at the Hotel Ville stop.

I met Micheline a few years ago in Paris at an organized dinner party group called Paris Soiree. Patricia Laplant-Collins organizes these fabulous dinner parties, and I was asked to give a talk about my book—to mostly expats living in Paris, but there were a few French people there, and Micheline was one of them. After the talk, she hurried up to me just as I was leaving and cornered me by the coat closet. *I must talk to you!* she said quickly, smiling widely, her eyes lit up. She's a tiny thing—dark hair, dark eyes, olive skin, and that night she was dressed in a classic white blouse and black pencil skirt. Heels, of course. There was so much excitement in this little body that it seemed she would burst. *Jeemee, I must tell you something!* She whispered this with such intensity, I admit, I was a little scared. This is because, after my first book came out, I often found myself confronted with a French woman saying, *excuse me, but I am a real French woman, and I have to tell you—I sleep alone*.

So, there!

But this is not what Micheline wanted to tell me. Rather, she wanted to talk about something much deeper. The nature of love. The secret to happiness. What it means to be a woman. I admit, this pretentious woman had grabbed my attention. She's around my age, but truthfully there was so much energy and enthusiasm, I felt as if I was speaking to a much younger, very wise woman. She looked at me and said, *the secret is you are Woman!* And here she pounded her heart with her little fist. *Just be!*

I was smitten. Obviously this French woman could tell me a thing or two. And so, on my next trip to France, we agreed to meet. She would help me understand the simplicity of just “being” and how French women cultivate their confidence, their mystery, and their allure.

In America, we would probably call Micheline an image consultant; however, for her, this idea of building an image is only a part of what she does for a client, and so she is actually called a “charisma expert.” I gather that this is something like an image consultant, in that she helps businessmen and women learn to be charming and negotiate the cultural crossroads between France and their home country.

There is clearly a lot of this cross-cultural business happening all over France. I notice tons of advertisements on the Métro that shout out—*Avez-vous la langue bien pen-due?* I suspect they're talking about how well you can speak the language. The literal translation is *How well is your tongue hung?* Underneath this it says, “Learn Wall Street English,” and there's a picture of a very attractive

man, but more often, a pretty young woman sticking out her tongue to show it's been painted to look like the American flag. Sometimes, the attractive woman has a British flag painted on her tongue, but it seems to me the Wall Street English wins out in the popularity contest. The message is clear—you want to do business in today's economy, you must learn to speak English. It seems to me that the French are selling this idea of speaking English in your professional life as something vaguely sexy. Or maybe not even vaguely sexy, but very sexy.

I meet Micheline at the café. She is wearing a gray-toned three-quarter-length jacket with trousers that are in the same tonal family, along with a crisp white blouse that emphasizes her tan and her dark hair.

Micheline tells me that she helps people find their charisma by teaching them the art of *savoir-faire*—how to dress, move, speak, and basically how to be attractive, appropriate, and worldly. But it is the part about being attractive that most interests me. I wonder what exactly she means by teaching charisma and if this is the secret to *ooh la la*.

We settle ourselves at an outdoor table under the awning. It is a Wednesday morning around eleven and so the café is fairly empty. But the streets are still slick from an early-morning rainfall, which has just now stopped. Passersby toting shopping bags hurry past the café. We position ourselves so that the tiny table is between us and so that we have a good view of the street scene. Micheline and I order a couple of espressos, and before I know it, we are off and running with *le projet du jour*. People are watching.

For a few minutes, Micheline is silent and I ask her what perfume she's wearing. *White Linen from Estée Lauder*, she tells me.

An American fragrance! I say, a little excited.

She shrugs her shoulders and says, *why not?*

Yes, indeed. Why not?

And then we return our gaze to the street. Men and women come and go, mostly it seems to me going in one direction. Toward something. Perhaps there is an office nearby? I notice a certain crispness to them. They definitely look more elegant than their American counterparts. I try to deconstruct why. Yes, the scarves make a big difference. It's not just the fact that there's a color accent and something to coordinate with a belt or shoes or a pocketbook. It's a finishing touch, and for a woman, I think, it's similar to a man wearing a tie. Micheline tells me the scarf is for protection. Micheline pronounces the word—*pro-teck-shion*—and then gestures to her throat; I get the sense that the scarf is not simply for protection against the elements, but it is a kind of armor that will protect a woman from unknown assailants, court intrigues, and malcontents of all kinds.

Yes, my imagination is having a bit of a field day. This always happens to me when I sit at a café. More so, I believe because I am with Micheline, who tells me to look at this woman's shoes. *They are not new, you see, but they are beautiful. She takes good care of them.* And then to notice another woman's walk. *It is the good posture that makes the difference, non?* I nod my head and think about this and then quickly straighten my shoulders and elongate my neck. *It's important to be attractive first for ourselves*, she tells me. *We do our best to reach this aim in our daily life. It's not only the appearance. It's also self-esteem, confidence, and respect for ourselves.*

Suddenly, we both look up as another woman comes into view. She is wearing purple leggings and a fabulous purple and black diamond-patterned dress. Her hair is hennaed red. *Ooh la la!* I say and turn to Micheline, who has taken out a cigarette from a little blue enamel case. *Non!* She tells me.

She's not French? I ask.

Micheline lights up her cigarette and takes a moment. She is thinking. After a bit, she says, *I*

giving this up, waving her hand at the smoke in the air. I'm down to three cigarettes a day. It takes time. Then she turns her head to the woman in purple. Maybe she's French. I don't know. It's a good possibility she is French. This is not the point. Anyway, French women, they can have bad dress.

I raise my eyes at her. Is this true? I wonder. If so, then my whole world is going to shatter. I don't know what I'll do. If I can't look to French women as my spiritual fashion guides, then what am I doing?

Micheline stubs out her cigarette. *A woman must be in alignment, she says.*

Alignment with what? I ask.

Herself! Her story about herself. So if she is French, then be French. If you are an American, be an American, but be yourself. Let your style tell your story.

Micheline goes on to explain to me that French women are uniquely aware that they do not really control their future. Things change and all one can do is take care of the present. *You can't take anything for granted, she tells me. It is important to work with what you have. Have a conversation between your ego and your heart. This is an ongoing conversation whether we're talking about chocolate or a new dress.* And I look at Micheline and realize that I don't often live in the present and that this has gotten me into some trouble in my life. I am often leaping toward the next thing and not appreciating what is right here before me. And part of this is the penchant to live on credit. French women don't have our style of credit cards, but rather something called *Carte Bleue*, which is kind of like our ATM debit cards, and there are no bank fees.

We pay the bill, and Micheline gives me a knowing glance, before we hit the streets of Marais. She walks fast, expertly weaving in and out of the crowds on the street. She points out the landmarks to me. We walk down rue des Francs-Bourgeois and look at the shops and then stroll down the historic Jewish quarter and over to the Pompidou Center and finally over to Le Hangar where we get a table at the outdoor café. From this vantage point we are able to do more people watching, plus we enjoy a really fine lunch of duck breast and then a salad (we skip the cheese course), along with a glass of wine. White for me, red for Micheline. Oh, and finally an espresso and some lemon sorbet.

After lunch, it's time for shopping! Micheline leads me through a courtyard and into a very elegant shop. She tells me that she will teach me about colors. And how they play a powerful role in a woman's wardrobe, but also in her charisma. We stop at a display table full of scarves. She picks out some plum-colored ones and holds them up to my face. I look in the mirror. I look horrible. The color absolutely drains everything from my face. It's actually scary. At first, I think Micheline does not know her colors—if she thinks that plum looks good on a blond-haired, blue-eyed Irish-pale girl—but I soon see she is trying to make a point. *Terrible, non?* She says, taking the offending scarf away.

Now you choose.

I feel like this is a trick question. I like red. Actually, I love red. I have loved it since I was a little girl and wore a red cotton shift dress to school practically every day—or at least as many times during the week that I could get away with. I wore this red dress by itself during the summertime as a sleeveless shift, and then during the winter it served as a jumper. I wore it over a white blouse, and another white blouse that had little red polka dots, and during the winter, over a black turtleneck. Even to this day, red and black is my favorite combination. I read that in feng shui it's the color combination of luck and power. Anyway, I've been wearing red for as long as I can remember. Plus, I wear red lipstick. Bright red lipstick. It can go in or out of style, and I don't care. I will wear red lipstick. I started wearing it because of my friend Brigitte, whom I met in London right after college. She wore red lipstick. She was an incredibly artsy and beautiful girl. She gave me a tube of red lipstick she bought at Marks & Spencer, and I have never looked back. Well, that's not exactly true.

because once in a while, I will have a crisis in confidence and ask my husband if he thinks I should switch to something less showy, but he always says no, I should wear my red lipstick because it makes me happy.

Still, standing in this shop with a real French woman watching me as I hold up a bright red scarf, wonder what she will say. She stands back and considers me and my relationship to the color red.

I look in the mirror and I see myself—a woman who is perhaps trying just a little too hard. What is this thing with red? Why do I cling to it? It's not the red lipstick or Brigitte or even the little red dress from my childhood; it's something else. But the thought of giving it up worries me and yet, I sense what's about to happen. Micheline purses her lips, shakes her head, and quietly says, *Non*.

No? No to red, no to the red lipstick? No to this dream of what red means to me? But before I can ask these things, she picks up a blue scarf, places it under my chin, and turns me to face the mirror and she smiles. Ah, yes. I must admit, I let out a deep sigh, because the truth is right there in front of me. Blue is my color. I look good in blue. I look peaceful and calm and, dare I say, confident. Oh, and I should say, this is not some timid pastel ice blue. This is a deep Atlantic Ocean blue. This is the blue of my French grandmother's family, who sailed over in the sixteenth century from their homeland in Normandy and made their way to the new land of Canada. This is a dangerous blue. A brave blue. A royal blue. A rugged blue. An adventurous blue. Perhaps, I think, blue is the new red!

Micheline seems very pleased with herself.

We frolic through the store, looking for more blue. Blue dresses, blue sweaters, blue skirts, blue trousers. It is a lot of fun. The ladies who run the shop seem to know Micheline, and so they don't mind the fact that we are taking so very long to select something. Here's what I love about shops in France, and actually in most of Europe. The salesladies are truly knowledgeable about the clothing. They are not working in a shop, just biding time until a Hollywood director discovers them. No, this is a very respectable career and they take their jobs quite seriously. You can trust them to steer you toward the kinds of colors, fabrics, and styles that suit you. Oh, and often everything is organized by color. And everything is *very* organized. They are not bunched together but very elegantly displayed. Still, as I get more serious about actually buying something, I notice the little price tags. Things are expensive. Micheline picks out a short-sleeved cobalt blue sweater dress for me. Actually it's not exactly a dress, but something you would wear over a black, fitted top. Or a turtleneck. That's what I imagine. It costs almost 200 euros. I am not going to buy this dress. I know this immediately. First of all, there's the price, and second of all, I'm worried about it fitting into my suitcase and then me having to lug it all over France.

I say no to the dress. I am being practical.

However, when it comes to a bright blue feather boa—yes, something a dancer in the Folies Bergères would wear—well, that's a different story. I prance around the store with the feather boa. I take a photo of myself in front of the mirror with the feather boa. Everyone agrees it's quite spectacular. Micheline smiles, but I can see she is being indulgent. She would prefer I buy the sweater dress. Something sensible. After all, she is used to working with businesspeople. But, I'm not a businessperson, so why should I be sensible?!

I buy the feather boa. Because that's just the kind of gal I am. And besides, it's blue. So that's some progress.

French Lessons

Find your signature color. And if you've already got a signature color, consider that it may be time to change it. Yes, it's important to decide what colors look best on you, but more than this, consider which colors make you feel more like yourself. It's never too late to take risks, to reinvent yourself. Ask yourself, what do you want from life? What is your true aim and purpose? This actually has more to do with fashion, beauty, and style than you might imagine. French women believe that beauty comes from the inside, rather than from the outside, so why not look into your heart to get in touch with your true beauty? Begin to see yourself as the heroine of your own life.

This true identity might not emerge immediately for you, but if you take time each day to enjoy your own beauty, little by little you will reconnect with your essential self and your unique look will light up.

If you can afford it and have the space, invest in a full-length three-way mirror. It's a remarkable thing and allows you to see yourself as others see you. It'll also give you the feeling of looking at yourself objectively, as if you are an actress in a movie—and the star of your own life—because you are!

Be willing to “changer les idées”. This is a French expression for changing your ideas, but it goes deeper than that. It means to clear your mind and reconsider a new possibility. French women do this on a daily basis by switching up the route they take to work, or buying groceries at a new market, but they also “changer les idées” as a way to refresh and spice up ordinary life. And they do this on a daily basis, rather than waiting until a big day when they go through one huge transformation involving major surgery and buckets of money.

Rather, be willing to change a little every day. Take risks. And finally, consider adding some much-needed blue (or green or pink or brown or yellow or violet) to your wardrobe.

CHAPTER THREE

I Took My Troubles Down to Madame Rue

There is a certain age when a woman must be beautiful to be loved and then there comes a time when she must be loved to be beautiful.

—FRANÇOISE SAGAN

TODAY I AM meeting an American expat friend at the famous café, Les Deux Magots on the Left Bank. It's a big, touristy place, but very central to any Left Bank excursion into the world of French beauty, skincare, and the art of *être bien dans sa peau*. Feeling good in one's own skin and being comfortable with oneself.

My friend's name is Heather Stimmler-Hall.

In a way, her name says it all. There is something about that hyphenated last name that makes one think of upper-crust American girls whose great-great-great-grandmothers came over on the Mayflower. Girls who attended Miss Porter's School and went on to study at Bryn Mawr. Oh, and there is the first name—Heather. Much more modern. Young. It doesn't exactly go with the hyphenated last name, but then again, it doesn't *not* go. It adds a little dash of something wild and unpredictable. As if on the day of her birth, her parents had a Greenwich Village moment and spontaneously took it upon themselves to go against the family tradition, bypass the obvious wasp names her cousins were given—forgo the Polly, Page, and Piper—and name their newborn baby girl Heather.

All this is a flight of imagination on my part. Heather is actually from Arizona, but she still looks and holds herself like a New England beauty with great cheekbones, a fierce intelligence, and beauty to boot! Here's the delightful thing about Heather. She's aware of the impression she makes on people and so she approaches every encounter with grace and elegance, yes. But also, a healthy dose of humor.

In fact, there's even a bit of naughtiness in the middle of all this elegance. Still, it's so subtle, you have to really be on your toes to catch it.

I met Heather a few years ago when her book *Naughty Paris: A Lady's Guide to the Sexy City* finally came out. I was actually introduced to her by Ethan Gilsdorf, author of the book *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks*. We were on a panel together at the Muse and the Marketplace conference in Boston not too long ago. Yes, I know, French women authors and dwellers of the imaginary realm—strange bedfellows!

Still, he told me I must meet his friend, Heather. And so I did. First in New York City and later in Paris. Heather leads tours for groups, individuals, women-only, and everything in between. She owns and operates a tour service called Secrets of Paris. Oh, and did I mention she's tall and slender and very stylish? Well, she is.

I am coming from the 17th arrondissement, where I have been visiting my friend Nancy, and while the clouds were merely threatening a rainfall when I walked into the Métro, by the time I come out at Mabillon near Saint Germain-des-Prés, the sky has turned pitch-black and the rain is pouring down. I've never seen anything quite like it. So volatile and so sudden. I can't help thinking this is

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