**Paris Life: of sorts, for some**

The outskirts of Paris are burning. Well, to be more precise, there have been several sporadic outbreaks of arson on empty shops and some torching of a few cars. Despite this, ‘Paris in Flames’ seems, to most newspaper editors, to be a valid extension of the truth for the sake of a good headline.

The magazine I work for has got caught up in the frenzy. Strictly it isn’t anything to do with us. We don’t do news. We do confessionals: ‘I live with a serial killer’; ‘I ate my kids’; that sort of thing. Nevertheless our editor decided that ‘all this Paris stuff’ (He has a way with words) is worth capitalising on and that I am just the ‘nice little girl reporter’ (He has a way with social attitudes as well) to go out there and fish out some human interest stories. I am also the only person he knows who speaks French.

‘Forget the news. Forget the rioting. Dig into what everyday life is like for those kids. What makes them tick? And I don’t want any psycobabble nonsense. I want true-life stories straight from the horses’ mouths. I want the nitty-gritty of how they get through life on crap estates way out on the edge of nowhere. I want our kind of story and I want you back here in two days. This isn’t some holiday jaunt to Paris. This is work’.

I go through some of the news accounts and jot down the names of estates. I study the news pictures: All young men, all aged 15-30 by the look of them, a mix of African migrants and poor French. I book an early morning flight and a cheap hotel then get an early night.

On the plane I sketch out my approach: Go for cheeky, chatty young women. Ones with troublesome boyfriends. Get a female take on it all. Our usual formula, in fact. Focus on relationships not politics. Don’t get dragged into reporting events; stick to using them as colourful background. Tease out the tales my young women will have to tell. I barely have time to reassure myself that all this is nothing that will give me any bother, even in French, before we are landing and I am heading for the hotel.

I don’t waste time unpacking. I want to get straight out to the estate I had read most about. The hotel receptionist counsels against it. The taxi driver refuses to go near it. The best I get from him is an offer to drop me a mile away (‘You can walk from there if you are the brave sort’) and the information that buses go there (‘If you want to risk it’).

The more I think about it the more I realise they are right. What am I going to do: Turn up on an unknown housing estate, where there have been recent clashes with the police, and start chatting to local girls? How will that go down? What response will that get? I decide on a technique I have used before, one that gets girls coming to me offering information.

A quick internet search gives me the addresses of the few small shops on the estate. Phoning them gets me, at a slightly extortionate rate, a notice in their windows offering 100 Euros for the first four young women who want to appear in a hot-shot UK magazine talking about themselves. The notice stresses in big letters that this offer is only open until lunchtime today and gives my mobile number. I head to the bar and order a large red wine.

I have to wait less than an hour. Two young women; right estate; keen to be famous for a short time. We agree a small cafe just outside the estate as a suitable meeting place.

I get there in good time and think of questions. I like to have some in my head to fall back on but know that it always works better if I just go with the flow of conversation until it leads somewhere interesting. I check my watch: They are late.

In my line of work I have learnt to be patient. The lives of interesting people don’t usually run to neat timetables. Often Life gets in the way of life. Bigger events overtake everyday processes. I wait, knowing that they will arrive when life lets them.

I don’t have long to wait. As they come through the door I sum them up immediately. They are both somewhere in their early twenties. One entering a bit before the other, looking around more confidently. Dark hair, a bit on the taller side of average. Nothing outstanding about her except that she is very alert to everything. The other, a step or two behind, is squat with lighter hair.

The first one clearly has more about her. She looks the sort to have ideas and opinions and, more importantly, the words with which to express them. She is the sort who is able to go somewhere in life. Whether or not she can ever get there from her life on the estate is another matter.

The other looks more put upon, more harassed, less in control of her life. She seems less capable of rising above things. She may have talent but it will be eroded by life. She will settle for what is going. Will she be happy with that? There is a 50:50 chance: Yes or No.

The taller one comes across to where I am sitting and introduces the two of them. She is Catherine; the other is Becca. ‘Sorry we are late,’ she adds.

The other one, peering round her friend, eager not to be left out: ‘I had to deal with that dozy boyfriend of mine. He got himself stabbed this morning – well, more punctured than stabbed, but he does like to make a real drama out of things. He is such a baby when it comes to injuries. I just needed to reassure him .... anyway, here we are now.’

This sounds an interesting enough place to start. I push gently. ‘So tell me about the stabbing?’ I ask, looking at both of them. It is Becca who jumps in again.

‘Catherine texted me : *Get over here now. You are about to be famous*. I was still in bed but needed a pee so went into the bathroom and answered the text whilst I was sitting on the toilet. When I went back into the bedroom Philipe wanted to know who it was and everything. I told him and said I was off to meet her but I don’t think he believed me. He can be so jealous at times. Not that you would hold that against him. He has a lot of good points. Comrade might play at Leader but every leader needs an Action Man to carry things out. That is what my Philipe is. He is Comrade’s trusted lieutenant. He is someone to rely on, even if he does flare up a bit too often. You can put your life in his hands: that is what I love about him. Well, that and the sex.’

Me: ‘So what happened this morning? You left the flat leaving jealous Philipe in bed. What then?’

‘I threw on some clothes and dashed across towards Catherine’s block. To get there I have to go past the lock-up that got attacked and the block they were looking down from. I usually speed up a bit on that stretch, just in case. I was almost past the entrance when one of them appeared. He was one of the ones up on the roof I think. He was certainly the one on the bike, part of the group from the underpass. Not the little guy who got me wound up, but one of that group all the same. He looked me up and down as I got near to passing him.’

‘Don’t start again,’ I said. He smiled and held his hands up.

‘I surrender. I surrender’, he said and gave me a big smile. We kept walking past each other. After a few steps I looked back over my shoulder just to check he wasn’t up to anything and that is when I saw Philipe. The pillock must have followed me. I told you he was the jealous type. He was closing in on the Algerian kid. The two seemed to walk past each other but one of them must have said something. It is always the same with men. Two of them pass each other. There is a glance across to check who it is. Then a flash of recognition; a flash of tension. The other one looks back in the same way. Once eyes lock they aren’t going to let the other one go free. There might be something muttered under the breath and that is enough to set the whole thing off’.

Becca is talking quickly. My French is enough to follow most of it. There are some bits I need to go back and check out later. There is no space for that now. I don’t want to spoil the flow.

'They were a couple of paces past each other when Philipe suddenly turned back on the spot. The Algerian kid nearly jumped out of his skin. He must have been really jittery anyway. There was a bit of a scuffle and Philipe fell over holding his leg. The Algerian ran off. I ran back, so scared that Philipe had been properly knifed but it wasn’t anything serious. Just a flesh wound and not that deep but, still, it could have been worse. I’ve seen things like that before. Its easy for even a short blade to nick an artery. There is blood everywhere and before you know it the person is slowly dying away. This was more of a scratch than a stab. Philipe insisted there was to be no police. No fuss. He just wanted me to deal with it. So I got him back to his flat, stuck on some antiseptic cream and bandaged him up a bit more than was actually needed just to make him feel better. I told him to sit with his leg up and that I’d be back soon so, if it’s alright with you I just wanted to come to make sure that I got a mention and Catherine can tell you all you want to know. ‘

That confirms my first impression. Becca is the type to be brought to the meeting not the one doing the bringing. Even though she is desperate to be part of things, something is always going to get in the way and hold her up. She has gabbled her bit and now has had to dash off to pick up the pieces of a life slowly going to bits around her. I don’t mind. Her friend is the one I need. Becca scuttles out of the cafe and Catherine settles down in the chair next to me, asking what the chances are of having another coffee.

‘So does her boyfriend often get himself stabbed?’ I ask, smiling at her to shift the atmosphere away from her friend’s gabby rattling to something more of a chat between friends. She smiles back and eases into her chair.

‘He does seem to be the sort who finds trouble or, put another way, trouble seems to find him without him really trying. Accidents lurk round corners just waiting for him to arrive. He won’t admit it. He thinks he is the kingpin of Comrade’s plans but in reality he is a bit on the useless side. She ... (pointing to where her friend had left), she does more than he ever will. She loves him to bits. She knows he is a wastrel but, for now, he is her wastrel.’

I nod, recognising the type. Catherine says exactly what starts to go through my mind.

‘Philipe is a little boy at heart and Becca is the mothering type. It won’t be long before she gets pregnant and then it won’t be Action Man. It will be quiet evenings at home with her and the baby. She and Philipe will settle down, settle for the quiet life. So many have gone that way. They lose the spark; lose the fight.’

‘And you; is that what will happen to you?’

She just gives me a stare as an answer and silently drinks the rest of her coffee. I am tempted to jump in with another question but sense that there is more she is about to say. She looks into the distance then suddenly blinks and speaks.

‘Men: They think they do such important things but really they are just a gaggle of little boys. We patch up after them. We smooth their dented egos. We keep them standing, even if we do some of that lying down.’ This is said with such a delightful giggle that I giggle along with her. I like her. She really does have something about her.

I keep things moving things on. ‘What was the stabbing about? What kicked things off?’

‘It was last night. The two of us were walking home through the underpass where the road into the estate from the city centre cuts below the outer ring road flyover. It is a place of concrete columns and heavy shadows. Even on summer night, down there is gloom and that yellow half-light of sodium street lamps.

The usual small knot of kids were hanging around. There is always at least one on a bike able to scurry back to their home bit of turf to rally reinforcements. This is a frontline; they are lookouts, tripwires, alert to strangers. We aren’t strangers; we are well-known. We are not from their lot. We are part of the other group but we cut through this way every night with no real trouble.

So, last evening there was the usual routine: They shouted insults across at us. I laughed and shouted insults back. We carried on walking; they carried on watching.

That is how it goes every day. Do I ever feel afraid of being attacked? No, never. A couple tried it once and have some scars to show for it. The group know about my boxing and martial arts. They know that is how I met Comrade, at the small gym he runs in the basement of our housing block. I can defend myself but being his girlfriend brings a double layer of protection. No-one messes with me because no-one messes with him. If things ever got out of hand then, yes, they would probably try to get at me as a way of getting at him. I know that and Comrade knows that but, for now, things are well under control.

So yesterday was just a normal walk home – the few insults back and forth, the laughs, and so on. All except for this one kid. He seemed new to the group. He was tiny and kept himself half-hidden behind the others. He had a hood down over his face. He seemed intent on taking it further. The others shut up but he kept on, and on. His insults had a viciousness about them. When Becca got angry the others started jeering. The tiny one got more cocky. I had to really put him in his place. That shut the lot of them up and we walked on.

Becca rushed on ahead to find her Philipe and by the time I caught up with them he was sounding off about doing something to the one who had insulted his girl. He was all for shooting off to sort out ‘Tiny’ (let’s call him that since we don’t know his name), the cause of it all, the root of the problem. He kept saying things like, ‘Either they beat him or we will. Who does he think he is? Actually, thinking about it: No, he has made it personal. I will sort him out myself.’

It was all Becca could do to calm him down. The only thing that works with him is touch. She laid her hand on his arm and started to stroke it gently, talking quietly all the while. Slowly, like that, she talked him down. His fist, which had been tightly clenched, slowly unfolded. The creases went from his brow. His snarling settled back to normal breathing. Becca has to do that a lot with him. The trouble with him is that he is a doer and not a thinker.

I told Comrade what had happened. That’s not his real name, by the way. It comes from the red square patch on the back of his jacket. Everybody else wears plain black ones. He has his red flag emblem and stands out as leader.

‘They went too far,’ he said. ‘A response is called for. Nothing serious. No need for any wars or any weapons but they went too far all the same. Needs a demand for respect; needs some gentle retaliation. It is like a small boil: Lance it early or it will swell into something more serious.’ I saw his point.

At the end of training the lads always go into the locker area and hang around. Comrade asked for suggestions: A raid across, smash a few windows; break into their lock-up store; beat up one of their girlfriends

‘Rule out that last one,’ Comrade, again. ‘Doing that is doing exactly what we are taking issue about. We have standards. A raid, a bit of arson, a bit of damage – that is it, then. Later tonight. Just whilst things are fresh in their mind. Just so that they get the right message.’

‘Becca mentioned people on a rooftop. What was all that about?

‘That night, after the gym session, they went straight there. I went along to record it on my phone, to get the pictures that Comrade can use later to build his story round. The pictures also let him see who is out front and who is trying to avoid any involvement.’

She gets her phone out and starts scrolling through pictures, stopping from time to time to show some to me one by one.

Comrade is always there – sometimes leading the charge, sometimes holding back and scrambling up a banking to get a better view; directing the action. His trademark red square is stamped on what is happening.

She stops at a few others. ‘You can see Philipe out there in the thick of things. In this shot he is standing on the roof of their burnt-out car. He didn’t torch it or anything. It has been burnt like that, an empty shell, for a few months. It is where they hold private little conversations. Well no more, not now they don’t. Philipe jumped up and down on it so much he squashed the roof right in. Nobody can squeeze into it now. In this next photo he is jumping so high his head is clean out of the shot.

Here he is again, in another, standing on the roof of their lock-up waving the big Tricouleur flag: the one he takes to football matches. I think he had expected the lock-up to be full of useful things to steal but it was mostly a place for them to hang out. We could have told them that. We see their lads lounging around the doorway. We see things our boys don’t. As soon as any of our lot appear the others shut the doors half-closed so you can’t see inside. They don’t seem to care if we see; we don’t really matter. Anyway, once Philipe and the others broke in all they found were a few chairs (now broken), a table (also broken) and a small stack of porno magazines (that our lot brought back as trophies). Whilst all that was going on the Algerians were up on the roof of their block looking down.’

‘What about the other lads in your group?’ I ask.

‘Just hangers-on. They are just there. You’d hardly see them as separate people. They don’t stand out like Pierre or Comrade. They just hang around. They are just kids from the blocks.’

This is moving along nicely but I need to keep it going.

‘You live in the same block ... most of your lot? None of the Algerians live in the same block as you?’

‘We live in one block. They live in another.’

‘Would you like to live more mingled up? Wouldn’t that stop the Them and Us? Wouldn’t life be simpler, be better?’

‘Of course, in a way, but we don’t. That’s how it goes. We live with it.’

‘And is it always like this: the raids, the burnt-out cars, the hassles...?’

‘No, we get along fine. This was just putting things back in order. This was us getting the lines straight, getting things back to how they should be. They’re not our enemy. Comrade says that our real enemy is the State. I think he means the police when they come storming in for no good reason. Then we are a united front against them. That is what happened three nights ago. Everyone from every block on one side and the police on the other. That’s why we can’t allow fracture lines to appear. That’s why petty incidents have to be cleared up straight away. That is what Comrade says, anyway.’

‘What happened three nights ago?’ I had read the newspaper accounts but there was no harm in pushing for her side of the events.

‘Everything was quiet. Everything was normal. Then, from nowhere, there were police vans, riot shields, even dogs. They came storming in from all sides, batons out. We don’t know what they were after. Maybe it was some sort of training exercise or maybe they were just bored and we were that night’s entertainment. Whatever it was they appeared too suddenly and too many for us to deal with. We put up some resistance then melted away inside the blocks. That’s why people were still on edge a couple of evenings later. That’s why tiny cocky-mouth thought he could shout out anything he felt like. That’s why things had to be dealt with; why the lines had to be clear between our lot and their lot so that there was nothing to get in the way if the cops came round for a second go.’

She goes off to the toilet and I run through some headlines in my mind:

* I want riot chief’s baby ...
* I feel like my boyfriend’s mum ...
* My rioter lover is such a baby ....
* Rioting makes the sex so good ....

Is this misrepresenting Becca? I don’t think so, on balance, and she is getting paid for just turning up. Besides that she reads magazines like ours. She knows that things get slanted to give more effect. In return she gets to be a momentary celebrity.

Catherine is different. Where her friend spills her life out for anyone to hear, she keeps her secrets to herself. She is Little Miss Intelligent; far brighter than most of the young women I usually get to interview. I have got lots of information from her about things that have happened but I still know next to nothing about her as a person. The other one gave me a stream of background stuff but this one, if I am patient enough, is the one with the really useful stuff.

She comes back and starts talking across my thoughts.

‘So you see how it is for us. We live where we live. We don’t have the choice. We weren’t consulted before birth. We grew up in our group and our group was different from the other group. If an apartment comes vacant near our family we make sure it gets held onto until someone we know can take it over. The groups get more and more separated, but in our world life isn’t kind to any group. So we have small enemies and we have big enemies. We get along with our small enemies. We jointly resist the big enemies. The newspaper and TV say our small resistances were riots but they were not riots really. We were not trying to bring down the whole structure. We want quiet lives as much as anybody. We want to be left alone to get on with things. The so-called riots are just a bit of self-expression: Something that passes and things go back to normal. Three days ago you had the police raid. The next day there was a bit of an expression of passion on our side. Things were just settling back to normal when that Tiny kid shouted his mouth off.’

She started to gather her jacket up ready to leave but I rest my hand on her arm. She sits down again and continues, ‘So there you have it. That’s the one story you can tell for your readers. There is probably another story and another beyond that. A whole set of stories like onion layers. You have the power. You can choose which layer to settle on. You can select which story to tell. All people like us can do is live our lives and have stories told about us.’

I hadn’t expected this degree of insight. This is beyond picking up a few ideas for my magazine article. This is me in awe of a young woman ten years younger than me yet who, just at this moment, seems the more mature of the two of us. I want her to go on.

‘Tell me some of those other stories ...’

She sits forward in her chair, stares me in the face and rises to the challenge.

‘Well, let’s see. There is the surface story. This is about dozy young women and their even dozier boyfriends, with lives going nowhere except for babies, fights, problems, welfare … You get the picture. Mix into that some drug dealing or some crime and you have a good story. Or there is the story of people who stand out in their community as it tries to get by in poverty; people who do things, who try to make a difference in the lives of others. They don’t have what you might call a real job but they work hard so that life is easier for residents who seem so powerless. Or there is the story of how areas like ours get labelled by police and officials. Say you are from there and you get looked down on, lied about, shoved around – and if you speak up for yourself you are called rioters by the press … by people like you.’

I listen, captivated. Eventually I say to her, ‘See, you tell a fantastic story. You should get into writing. Use what you know to bring about the changes you want to see. Set it all down. Write from life; write from the heart. I’ll tell you what. I’ll set up a simple free email account in some alias name. I will text you the login details and, if anything happens, you can safely write it down and send it to me. Send me your views of life out here in the banlieues. You can write anything but keep it real, keep it true – no made up stuff. You can send it securely just to me. If anyone digs into the email they will find the account is registered to me. Send me good stuff and if I want to use any of your writing I will check back with you first. If my magazine print any (or if I sell it to other newspapers) you will get properly paid at our normal associate reporter rate. Get some money behind you. Rise above where you are now – and I mean that positively: not as in look down on your family and friends but as in don’t let your circumstances weigh you down. Feel free to go to University. Be someone.’

‘I am someone already,’ she shoots back with a flash of anger.

‘I know. I know .... but there’s more isn’t there?’

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Paris Life: of sots, for some was written in relation to the following works in the Metropolis exhibition:

* Mohamed Bourouissa ‘Peripheral’ (2007)
* Mohamed Bourouissa ‘The Fist’ (2006)
* Mohamed Bourouissa ‘The French Republic’ (2006)
* Mohamed Bourouissa ‘The Meeting’ (2005)
* Mohamed Bourouissa ‘Red Square’ (2005)
* Mohamed Bourouissa ‘The Rooftop’ (2007)
* Mohamed Bourouissa ‘The Dead End’ (2007)