PARIS MATCH

FALLING IN (LOVE) WITH THE FRENCH

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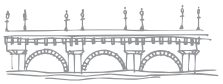

CHAPTER ONE

SHE HAD ME AT *BAH*

The moment I realised I deeply wanted to marry Anaïs was the moment when she casually reminded me that we could always get divorced. She said it in that French nonchalant way, preceding it with the classic '*Bah* . . .' opener I've heard millions of times from her since. Anything following *bah* is blatantly obvious to the person saying it; the tone contains a mounting exasperation with the one hearing it, who is usually me: '*Bah* . . . the drawer over there. Where else would we keep the batteries?' '*Bah* . . . Gene Hackman, John. Who did you think I was talking about?'

I've always wanted to film Anaïs when she starts her *bah*s, then splice them together into one fluid *bah*, which I could then post online to show the world I married a woman who's part French lamb. In this case, Anaïs's *bah* was followed by the revelation that marriage wasn't the be-all and end-all I'd built it up in my head to be. She loved me, yes, and sure, we should try it, but if it didn't work out, '*Bah* . . . we get divorced. What do you want me to say?'

At the time, we were standing on the medieval Pont-Neuf, the oldest bridge in Paris, which crosses the Seine and links the Left Bank with the Samaritaine department store on the right. The Pont-Neuf is one of those places in Paris that's so picturesque, you not only feel you're on a movie set when you're there, you're tempted to act out the film you think is being shot. It's been the backdrop for countless films, including the 1990s cult classic starring Juliette Binoche titled (not too ironically) *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*.

Perhaps those walking past us that night felt the cinematic magic of the moment in that same 'Paris is for lovers' way. Anaïs and I were just another passionate couple caught up in the throes of romance. They expected us to embrace at any moment with a Bacall–Bogart kiss, and then attach a stupid lock to a nearby railing.

If anyone had overheard Anaïs, it might have ruined their moment. But, for me, it was an epiphany. She was right. We could always just get divorced. There was a fallback plan. All of a sudden, the pressure was off, so what was I waiting for? I kissed her then, realising no American woman I knew would ever have said that. Paris was my kind of town, cold and cynical, and Anaïs is as Parisian as they get.

Before this moment, I'd fallen in love with France through another woman, my mother, who'd lived in Paris for a year, in 1953, learning to paint at Les Beaux-Arts after she'd graduated from Vassar.

I know the date because I found among her belongings a dog-eared clipping taken from the Pittsburgh Press's society section, which detailed Mom's scheduled trip to Paris, where

'cobblestone streets, art galleries and the picturesqueness of French life are luring this young Miss'. The piece was accompanied by a photo of Mom painting on the front porch of her family's farmhouse outside Pittsburgh, and went on to announce she and my grandmother would be hosting a picnic later that week, and that both would be 'judging hats'.

As a child I'd listen to Mom's stories of France, snuggled into the nook of her neck, as we lay in her bed, she either reading aloud from a diary she'd kept during that year or staring at the ceiling and delivering the lines from memory, sometimes even in French. Often she'd start at the very beginning of her adventure on a slow steamer bound for Le Havre, during which she attended lavish dinners and dances, had drinks with Princeton boys, met a swarthy count from Montenegro and visited a tiger in steerage. Other times, she'd skip ahead and place us smack dab in the centre of Paris where she bunked with others in a tiny flat on the Île Saint-Louis, soaking up the free-spirit life of post-war Paris.

I knew these Paris characters by heart: Mimi, Mom's roommate, who convinced her to captain a canoe on the Seine with two bottles of wine, which led to their capsising and being fished out by the gendarmes. Or her starving artist friend, Hannah, who ate only onions because she wanted to save money, and eating a raw onion apparently cuts your appetite. Then there was the struggling writer who had the unfortunate curse of sharing the last name Hemingway. '*Je me suis dit,*' Mom declared in French, 'a famous writing career was not in the cards for Russell Hemingway.'

While she spoke, my mother would take on an exotic glow, as if she was inhabited by the actress Simone Signoret, and because I was keen on following each of her stories and descriptions, I'd latch on to certain words and phrases I knew as a way to cross the stream that was the rest of her *vouloir*

courir comme ça French. During these nights *au lit*, me drifting off to sleep under France's fairytale spell, I imagined it as a land full of wonderment, taste and refinement, a place where Mom once shone, and where, one day, maybe I could, too.

Although the setting was perfect, Anaïs's and my timing was ass backwards. Normal couples fret about whether or not they should get married before one of them is pregnant. Not us. For Anaïs, the decision to have a child with me far outweighed whether we got married. Her friends were already having children with people they weren't married to and I'd met some of them, the woman usually referring to the silent man standing next to her not as her boyfriend or husband, but *le père de mon enfant* – 'the father of my child'.

Whereas my fellow Americans were doubling down on marriage in response to their divorce-addled parents, the French, it seemed, were headed in the other direction, abandoning the institution altogether or choosing from a sort of drive-thru menu of different options the French state offers. They had *mariage blanc* for people marrying to get green cards. There was something called PACS, a sort of common-law union for people who want the tax write-off, but who don't really believe in marriage. (Gay marriage was brought into law in 2012, but a lot of gay couples still use PACS because they think gay marriage is too hetero.) You could even live in something called *concubinage* (yes, you read that right – concublines are de facto couples living in what used to be called sin). And, if you do get married the traditional way, there's *mariage avec séparation de biens,* a pre-nup clause for the middle classes, found in any standard

marriage contract, which ensures that whatever was yours before the marriage (apartments, juicers, ironically purchased vinyl records) is returned to you if the marriage expires.

All in all, the French have almost as many choices of marriage as they do cheese, which I guess is why it takes them so long to decide. Often marriage takes a backseat to the really big benchmarks in life, like having kids or buying a house. It's not odd to see a ten-year-old daughter carrying her mom's dress or little boys bringing the ring to their dad at a wedding. Or a *famille recomposée,* where both partners bring their kids and exes from the first and second marriages to the wedding. The French don't treat marriage as the start of some grand adventure as Americans do. It is more the 'we might as well get married now that we've done everything else' cherry on top. Marriages in France are for forty-year-olds who want to have a big party before their parents die.

A lot of this explained Anaïs's jaded response that night on the Pont-Neuf. That and the fact she'd already been married once. I hadn't, though, and expected to have much more clarity by this point, the kind that's supposed to hit you as you stand on a Parisian bridge on a warm night overlooking the Seine with the woman you love.

Up until our decision that night on the Pont-Neuf, my life had been a relatively idle and fancy-free one. I was living in New York, or more precisely Brooklyn, a freelance writer, single, and tethered to the city only by my membership to the NY Sports Club. On the ground floor of my building was a French café called Le Gamin. And it was there that I met my future wife.

Anaïs had one of those bobs with concave bangs French women seem to master, which make them look like adorable 1960s KGB agents. We'd chat over countless *cafés*, sometimes in French, sometimes in English – me never knowing where I really stood, because French women don't show their cards early. But all became clear when I one day offered her the ultimate gift, one no Parisian woman in the late 1990s could refuse – a biography of the Hong Kong film director Wong Kar-wai. It was a cheap ploy, since I knew Anaïs wasn't just a waitress, but an actress as well. For one of our first dates, she took me to a festival where a film she'd starred in was premiering. I'd never been somebody's arm candy before, so I relished the chance, only to find out moments later, when the lights dimmed and the film started rolling, that the Anaïs on screen was a deeply troubled person who slept with everyone, men and women alike.

My parents missed that movie, thank goodness, but were determined to meet Anaïs. They used the excuse of my thirtieth birthday to make a trip north from DC and drop by semi-unannounced, calling me on a Saturday morning to tell me they were on their way over for brunch.

After I hung up, my first instinct wasn't to cheerfully tell Anaïs that my parents were in town. It was to hide her or at least get her out of my apartment.

'They can't see you here!' I told her in a panicked voice.

Anaïs didn't understand. Instead, she squinted at me. (Just as I now find myself squinting on countless occasions in France when I find myself clueless.)

'Because they'll have the impression we're *sleeping* together.' My tone was bitchy because all of this was so very obvious.

'Well, we are.'

'Yeah, but they don't know that.'

Anaïs then laughed in my face.

What I hadn't explained was that my parents were notoriously old. They'd been old since I was little. My dad had fought in World War II, and my mother had an *I like Ike* pin and drank gin and tonics.

They'd met in 1960s Washington, where my father, a perennial bachelor into his mid-forties, worked for the NBC affiliate WRC. Dad called himself a newsman, and for decades he was on the radio and TV, hosting a political round-table show called *Dimension Washington* or, as he liked to call it, *Dementia Washington*. He'd go on to win Emmy Awards for his work, one for a film titled *The Last Out*, a documentary about Griffith Stadium, the famed ballpark of the Washington Senators, which Dad argued was one of the last points of common ground for a city gradually becoming splintered.

My mother had become a full- time painter by then, making sketches of the people and places she encountered, drawings she called her 'charcoals', which she'd later transform into acrylic and oil canvases. These soon numbered into the hundreds, something she said was both a blessing and a curse: 'I had tons of paintings to hang, but no walls!'

The solution would come in the form of my father, who'd recently purchased a decrepit brownstone in the Georgetown neighbourhood of Washington. While many of his friends begged him to move to the suburbs after the riots in the 1960s, Dad doubled down on the city, buying this four-storey fixer-upper, which was weird, considering he lived alone. Weirder, my mother said, was when she

visited the house for the first time and saw he'd only renovated a kitchen, a bathroom and part of a bedroom. The rest of the house was vacant.

The two had been set up through Dad's best friend, Mac McGarry, who as well as having the best name for TV hosted a weekly show at WRC called *It's Academic*, a sort of American *University Challenge* for high school students, which now resides in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the longest-running quiz programme in TV history. Mac and his wife, Babette, had been trying unsuccessfully for years to set my father up. Then one New Year's Eve, a neighbour mentioned in passing that a young woman named Annie-Lou from Pittsburgh had just arrived and needed a last-minute date. They seized the opportunity, and Dad stepped in. The two 'hit it off', as they say, and soon my mother married this man and moved into his lonely cobwebbed mansion, hanging her paintings and commandeering the top floor for her studio. She built a patio out the back, a bar in the basement with a dance floor, and installed a piano and zebra-skin couches so they could 'properly receive.' The house would also feature a guest room with a canopy bed and a study, and eventually a tiny room for one child who came very late for two people who'd never thought they'd be married, let alone parents.

These were the people coming over in five minutes, I wanted to tell Anaïs. People who 'dated' and who were introduced to each other through friends on New Year's Eves, people who 'properly received' and didn't sleep around and then brunch with their parents afterwards.

'So could you maybe like leave now?' I nervously fiddled with the phone. 'And, I don't know, come back once they're here? I'll call a car service?'

Anaïs realised I wasn't kidding. And, like that, her look became one of disgust; the kind someone might flash when

they notice the person across from them has long, curled fingernails. 'No, I khant jest leave and like calm bach,' she snapped, doing the best imitation a Frenchwoman could do of a California Valley girl.

None of her anger was directed at my parents, of course. Anaïs was upset at this child in front of her, masquerading as an adult. 'What's going to happen is *zis*,' she explained. 'We're going to make some coffee, and I'm going to take a shower, so we're ready when they're here.'

Within minutes the door rang. And, over coffee, I tried to prep Mom and Dad for what I thought would be the big revelation – that there was a woman in my bedroom.

'Did I mention I'm seeing Anaïs?'

'Yes, you did,' my mother said, 'and she sounds grand.'

'Well, she's sure excited to see you.' I bit my lip. 'Oh. Here she is. Ha. Ha. Hi, Anaïs.'

Anaïs came out of my bedroom and introduced herself. Everyone, to my shock, behaved like real adults, and soon we were at brunch. Granted Mom and Dad still called me Johnny in front of her, and asked Anaïs if she was a Democrat like me, but something seemed different, I could tell. It was if they were thanking Anaïs or doing what they couldn't – that is, make me a man.

Soon Anaïs would return to Paris, where employment for a French actress is a bit easier to find. But before we could embark on a drawn-out, likely-to-die, long-distance relationship, two towers would fall on Manhattan, anthrax would show up in the US mail, war would be declared, and that reptile-brained instinct humans have to procreate

during times of crisis would push me onto an Air France flight to accompany Anaïs to a wedding in France. There, I'd find out first-hand that terror sex does have consequences, and three months later we were pregnant on the Pont-Neuf deciding whether to marry.

When I broke the big news to Mom and Dad, I separated it into two chunks, thinking it would be easier for them to swallow. The 'Anaïs and I are getting married!' generated yays and cheers, so I used the crowd noise to sneak in my follow-up 'and Anaïs is pregnant'. They rolled with it. Plus an engagement meant they could throw a party in Georgetown and let all the guests figure out the math of who and what came first. What they didn't appreciate was when I called back a week later in a panic, explaining in an existential crisis kind of way that I'd had second thoughts and that maybe it all was a big mistake. I'd forgotten, of course, that women like my mother didn't make big mistakes. Nor did they offer up advice for something as large as this. It was crude. And I was supposed to be smart enough to know what to do by now and how to react and, especially, how to decipher what she was trying to say without her having to spell it out for me.

'What aren't you sure about, dear?' she asked. There was silence on the end for once. The blaring TV in the living room had been turned off.

'About having a child and all this with Anaïs. Maybe we shouldn't get married. Maybe we should just – I don't know. Anaïs'll be fine.' I made it sound as if I was letting Anaïs travel to Mexico with friends for a week without me.

There was silence on the phone.

'No, you're right. Anaïs and the child will be fine without you.' Mom's voice had hardened, giving her the air of a pissed-off Elizabeth Taylor. 'You're the one I'm worried about, because I will cut you off, boy.'

She said *boy* like a Texan and that was the end of our talk. The anger in her voice was an ominous warning of where my life would head if I remained a child. I would marry this girl and get on with this life that my clumsy ass had luckily stumbled over. 'Besides,' she concluded, 'I sent out the invites for the engagement party.'

My mother didn't understand why I was coming clean to her anyway. It was Anaïs I needed to talk to. And so it was there on that Parisian night, with Anaïs *bah*-ing me on the Pont-Neuf, that everything suddenly fell into place.

I should probably explain at this point something of Anaïs's family, who, some critics might suggest, were getting the riskier deal, embracing an unemployed American writer.

As luck would have it, they were not a conventional crew. Anaïs's father, Hughes, resembles Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant, and in France has almost the same notoriety. He led a rock group in the 1970s called Malicorne, which could best be described as a French Jethro Tull; a band whose Druid influences mixed bagpipes with heavy guitar and gave the group a cultlike following it still enjoys today. Anytime Anaïs works on a play or film, there's invariably a roadie/gaffer/lighting grip who stands slack-jawed when he finds out who her dad is, asking if he can have a signed copy of something, anything. Malicorne is the group sound engineers who buy good weed listen to.

My father-in-law lived the cliché you'd expect from a successful ex-rock star. He had an insane apartment in Montmartre that overlooked Paris. He was on wife number four, a wife younger than his daughter (my future wife),

a point he'd bring up to me every so often in the future. He'd also recently become a father again. But, aside from his Benjamin Button life cycle, Hughes was hardly the overbearing *beau-père* so many of my friends who'd recently married were lamenting. When they'd complain about their fathers-in-law, citing the age-old tropes of pressure to earn more money or the feeling of not measuring up, I could only sit back and smile at what fortune had bestowed upon me.

Hughes had known the fallow periods of being an artist. He'd written jingles for ads and had gone out of pocket to produce albums his labels didn't want. He'd also spent his fair share of time on the beach, so my (un)employed status didn't really faze him. Was he going to be the dad who shows up on Christmas Eve with a reindeer sweater to take the kids to the Galeries Lafayette shop window decorations? Of course not. But he would jump into a Kuala Lumpur pool fully clothed with you on New Year's Eve, or treat you to a four-hour Montmartre lunch, then walk you around Paris to see his old haunts, all the time insisting we let our wives' calls go to voicemail.

During these post-*déjeuner* strolls, Hughes filled me in on the family's backstory: how Anaïs was technically a countess and how she (well, they) came from an illustrious French aristocrat family, the kind whose name has two *de*s and one *la* in it, the kind whose tradition of having at least one male relative in the military each generation dates all the way back to the Fifth Crusade.

This proud military lineage, which included General Leclerc, who liberated Paris with De Gaulle, was broken (of course) by Hughes, who became the first male not to fall in line, choosing instead, as he told me, 'the second-best option: French folk rock star.' And, in keeping with this, Anaïs grew up very differently from how I might have imagined a French

aristocrat would. Her childhood wasn't one of running around the château in a Burberry dress chased by a British nanny, but following her dad's group on tour, sleeping with her sister on leather restaurant banquettes during post-concert band dinners.

Like Hughes, none of Anaïs's aunts or uncles or cousins would fill out the portraits of what I expected the noble French to be, either. They were more like the Kennedys, actually, meaning everyone voted Left, each liked to drink, and there were a few tragic deaths here and there. Like poor British uncle Tony, who, after arriving from London at Gare du Nord, was run over after he stepped off the sidewalk, because, as a Brit, he was looking the wrong way.

They also had a tendency to shun their titles, thanks in large part to Hughes's generation – counterculture sixties kids known in France as the *soixante-huitards* ('68ers – in reference to the protest of 1968) – who'd run from, rather than embraced, the wave of patronage that had broken upon them. Hughes had forgone inheriting the château (which comes with being first in line), seeing that the deal required him to live in it full time, something his music business wouldn't allow. Anaïs's aunt had become the first female bus driver in France. Other aunts were musicians, some were professors, and one uncle was a journalist. The most aristocratic thing about them was that everyone spoke at least three languages. They'd all grown up in Spain. And all, except for one, had married foreigners.

Our wedding, we decided, should be held in Paris. That way, Anaïs wouldn't have to fly, and we could plan something I

wasn't really comfortable with in a language I wasn't really comfortable speaking. So the invites were sent out, the reception booked, and before long we were saying our vows at the American Church in Paris on a nippy spring day in late April. The fact that the American Church was Protestant (a rarity in Paris), with a reverend from Richmond, gave it allure. I was a sucker for Pastor Rogers's Virginia drawl. Yes, he called me Don (which I corrected each time) and called Anaïs Ah-Nye-is (which she let ride). But, for us, Pastor Rogers could do no wrong.

Just as I was attracted to the cold rationalism of Cartesian France, Anaïs was equally giddy to marry into American PowerPointed pragmatism, which is exactly what Rogers offered when he met with us to discuss the wedding and the pitfalls of modern marriage. Inside his office, in the bowels of the church, Rogers refrained from talking about faith or Jesus or the church's stance on abortion, and instead jumped quickly into discussing the three traps that await the modern couple. We weren't to worry, though, as each, he felt, had its solution. For the in-law issues? Spend Thanksgiving with one family, Christmas with another. For money issues? Have individual bank accounts and one common account. And for sex? Take long weekends without the kids. The fact that she was hearing this from a man of the cloth was downright exotic for Anaïs – and nothing like the abstractions of the Catholic priests or nuns whom she'd feared at school.

Rogers even had a response to Anaïs's having been married before. 'Well, I'm not going to say it didn't happen,' he started. 'Look,' he then leaned forward and spoke in a hushed tone as if he were a coach drawing up a play, 'I like to look at life a lot like a lawn, and that part over there that's a little muddy? Well, we're just going to cover it with a white sheet and walk on it.' I really didn't get this metaphor. If a

white sheet were walked over, wouldn't mud seep through? And isn't covering up the past with a sheet kind of, I don't know, repressed? But Anaïs was sold and beaming at him, and soon we were shaking hands and out the door. We were married the next week.

For any marriage to be official in France, however, the grand tradition of *laïcité* (the French concept of secularism) requires each couple to first pass before *la mairie* (town hall), regardless of one's religion or gender. There you stand before the mayor of your arrondissement (in our case the Tenth), wearing a tricoloured sash, and swear an oath of civic union, while the portrait of the French president (in our case, Jacques Chirac) beams down on you both.

Since the mayor (you hope) has other stuff to do during the week, weddings are held on select days, and since there's no way around a town hall marriage, there's a cattle-call-type crowd in the lobby of each *mairie* on Saturday mornings. If you're getting married in the diverse Tenth, you'll wait your turn with Indian, African, Orthodox Jewish and Arabic brides, all decked out in traditional wear, milling around with cellphones and taking turns smiling in group photos on the red carpeted steps leading up to the main hall.

It's what city planners dreamed of when they imagined integration, and yet it's all still very bureaucratically French. IDs are passed around. You sign a lot of stuff you don't understand and, at the end, you receive a *livret de famille* (family notebook), a family passport which you'll be called upon to present at the most solemn and dire life events. There's a page for births (and deaths) of children, births and deaths of parents, naming of children and divorce judgments – the only information people will remember you by two hundred years from now. Crucially, there's only one *livret* per family (and there are no copies), so in our family there's an

obligatory biannual panic to find it, with Anaïs hysterically screaming, '*Le livret de famille est perdu!!*'

Following our swearing--in ceremony, an entourage made up mostly of French (the Americans were too jet lagged to make the 10am call time) migrated to a café across the street. There was Yolaine, Anaïs's aunt who had become France's first female bus driver, and who's now a deputy in French Parliament for the Macron party. There was Hughes, of course, joined by his two little children (Anaïs's brother and sister), who were serving as the flower girl and page boy. And there was Laure, Anaïs's mother, strolling next to Hughes, looking like she had thirty years earlier, when she'd married Hughes at eighteen, having met him when Hughes's band played at her debutante party.

All of us commandeered part of the café, and soon Champagne was brought out and everyone drank a little too fast considering it was still only 11am. Cops and deliverymen, barflies, card players and pensioners raised their cups of coffee and glasses of Chablis to the jeunes mariés in the back. Anaïs sat on my knee, and all I wanted to do was stop time in that little hole in the wall and let the rest of the marriage finish itself.

Unfortunately, that wasn't possible. Our formal wedding was across town in the posh Seventh Arrondissement on the Quai d'Orsay, the thoroughfare that runs along the Seine's Left Bank in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. It was a fifteen-minute metro ride that by car felt as if it took two hours.

There Pastor Rogers called me John for the first time, and I was so thrilled I kissed Anaïs to celebrate. We left the church to music that Hughes had composed for the event, and from the steps Anaïs tossed a giant bouquet into the frisky April air toward a pile of French and American single women each trying to be so polite to the others that nobody bothered to

reach up to catch it. The bouquet hit the ground with a thud, followed by a group-wide sigh of pity. We were hitched.

We topped off the ceremony aboard a *péniche* drifting up and down the Seine long into the next morning, the boat brimming with Parisians and New Yorkers all of whom were enjoying something they'd never seen or done before.

Apart from Notre Dame and the Louvre, the Parisians weren't very helpful in identifying many of the illuminated landmarks we were drifting by, which led to awkward misunderstandings.

'What's that? French Parliament?' the American would ask.

'I don't know. What do you think?' the French person would say.

'Are you being sarcastic?' the American would then reply.

The highlight of the night was watching my parents seated next to Anaïs's grandparents, as they were the same age and had much in common. Since my mother had lived in Paris in the 1950s, she knew Paris quite well, and she and Anaïs's grandmother compared neighbourhoods, nightclubs and styles, trading lines in French and English. Their husbands (both veterans of World War II) concentrated more on Paris in the 1940s: the liberation of Paris and D-Day, the merriment of the night prompting my father to quip, 'Yeah, but Alain, six weeks and you guys fold? I mean, jeez!'

When I first met Anaïs in New York in 2000, I of course didn't know she was a French blue blood. And, even if I had, I probably wouldn't have cared that much. Nobility doesn't mean squat in New York. Sure, you gloss over a couple of

aristocrat names here and there in the *Vanity Fair* event pages – Count von Hollenlohe-something-or-other at the Hamptons Film Festival, and you wonder who that person is, only because they're standing next to real American royalty like Ryan Gosling or The Rock.

And the French aren't too impressed themselves, either. Half of those claiming some sort of royal status probably aren't even aristocrats, Anaïs would later tell me. They're 'usurpers', meaning they'd usurped the title from someone and made it their own. And there were a bunch of usurpers apparently in the States, she said, where people were less equipped to sniff out these fakes.

I was intrigued by this usurping business, not just because it's such a great verb, but because there was also a Barry Lyndon-like treachery my life needed more of. Anaïs told me that in France usurping happens all the time. Some bourgeois *arriviste* (social climber) would assume an aristocratic name as a way to gain an invitation to a Sotheby's auction or a lower bank rate, or, in the case of 1970s politician Valéry Giscard (he later became Valéry Giscard d'Estaing), the position of French president.

There was actually a story about Anaïs's own family name being usurped. Some cad had gone so far as to write to Anaïs's great-grandfather asking permission to use the name. He was thanked for his polite request, of course, but no, that was completely impossible. And soon a social equivalent of a cease-and-desist letter was sent out. The usurper ran with the name anyway.

This would start what Anaïs's family would call the 'fake branch'. Although there was outrage at the outset, eventually the fake branch would prove to be a convenient alibi. If there was ever a wayward cousin the family was embarrassed by, all anyone needed to say was 'Oh, he's from the fake branch.'

That gross far-right politician who's always yapping on TV? Never met him, certainly a usurper.

As our boat cut through the waves of the Seine, I had the idea that some of the wedding guests might have thought I was a usurper. I mean, the parallels were obvious. I meet my target in a New York bar. Claim a sketchy profession. I have a *von* at the beginning of my name. Perhaps those 'Well, John's done quite well for himself, hasn't he', nudge-nudge wink-wink comments I'd noticed were meant to convey I was part of some club, and that, by marrying Anaïs, my ship had come in. But it hadn't, and probably wouldn't. And who cared? If anything, our story was even better. I'd fallen for a French countess thinking she was a French waitress, which in itself sounded even more Hollywoodian (and thus authentically American aristocratic).

Just then our boat passed underneath the Pont-Neuf, its Parisian beige stone radiating over the water. And when we came out on the other end, a sort of premonition seized me. All that I was about to embark on could have easily slipped by the wayside had I not kissed Anaïs that fateful night. None of the intricate French dinners I'd eventually learn to master, nor the weird vacations I'd eventually grow to fear. None of the odd jobs I'd land, nor the strange situations my bumbling French would put me in. Perhaps not even the ratty French-American kids we'd eventually have together. None of these glorious things would have come to pass had the dancing pregnant woman at the stern of the boat not assured me, in all her French frankness, that *bah*, we could always just get divorced.