

# France is Like a Coconut

by Anna Hartley

## SAMPLE CHAPTER: “COMPASS”

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I'm lost.

I can't find the hiking section of the enormous sporting goods store that I've entered. Each time I turn the corner of another rack of running shoes, or snorkels, or protein shakes I hit a dead end. Eventually, I accost a blue-vested worker before he can scurry away into the rabbit warren that is the children's apparel department and describe what it is that I'm looking for.

"It's the thing... when we go walking... and we ask it 'where is North?'" I say hopefully, the word I had looked up in the dictionary earlier in the day evaporating from my brain. I'm holding my right hand out in front of me, palm up, waving it around like a divining rod, doing a very good impression of someone who has lost the plot.

"Eeuh... ". The young sales attendant seems unused to someone so willing to resort to pantomime when words have failed them.

"You know..." and I frown and put my finger to my lips in the caricature of a thoughtful expression. "Is north here? Is it here?" I turn left to right, waving my empty hand around like an inebriated beggar on the metro. My strange performance draws his colleague closer.

"Uh... a compass?" he offers.

"Yes! Compass! That's it!" I'm overjoyed. "Compass!" I roll the French word around in my mouth for a moment, then ask if it is masculine or feminine. Again, he is completely thrown by my strange question.

"Ah...*une boussole*... it's feminine". He says slowly, emphasizing the article for my benefit.

After watching me file this away, he directs me to the first floor, back to the entrance of the huge store that faces onto Avenue Wagram, just down from the Arc de Triomphe. I finally locate the compasses and leave the store feeling I've probably just spent the best 4€ of my life.

My job as an English teacher in Paris has me zigzagging the city constantly, and I have come to know it's layout very well. I have a large map pinned on the wall next to the desk in my minuscule rented room and glance at it every morning as I pack my bag, building, over weeks, a stubborn mental impression of the city I now call home. North, South, East, West. Left Bank, Right Bank. Inside and sometimes outside the peripherique. My apartment is a stone's throw from Boulevard Saint-Michel, half of the north-south artery that cuts through the southern half of the city, and if I can find a point of reference, such as the Eiffel Tower peekaboo-ing from behind a building, or even the swooping arc of its spotlight, I know how to get home. But after exiting numerous metro stations in dodgy parts of the city, looking for unfamiliar buildings and unable to pause on the corner to orient myself (because to do so will advertise that I am unsure, lost, muggable) that I realize what I need.

"It's like when you know where the station is on the map, and you know you have to go say... east two blocks to get to the building, but when you exit, you just don't know what way you are facing?"

My friend Chris turns to look down at me as we walk down the street together, all tall and trim in a crisp, smart suit, his hands in his pockets. He's also an expat, also an English teacher, as new to the city as I am but a bit older, and perhaps a bit more at ease in this strange new land.

"No" he says, puzzled.

"No what?" I ask.

"I always know what way I'm facing" he replies, stepping around a small child who has stopped in the middle of the footpath, with the early afternoon sun catching the planes of his model-handsome face. Confident. Purposeful.

I imagine him as Magneto from X-Men, a superhero with tiny particles of iron in every cell of his body, able to sense the magnetic pull of the North Pole at all times.

"What? How?"

"Well, I just know which way the train was going when I got off so I keep that in mind when I'm exiting" he replies.

I look at him in wonderment, thinking of the vast, cavernous underground stations we have to navigate every day, with their ups and downs, curves and slopes and the complete absence of any reference to the outside world. I heard once that Châtelet - Les Halles was the largest public underground structure in Europe, and I believed it. Trudging for what feels like kilometers through badly lit, damp, grey corridors, along travelators that often don't work, and past homeless people begging for coins is part of my daily routine. I think of the Saint-Lazare station, a vortex of metro lines and people that seem to have been designed only to bamboozle, to retard traffic flow, to knock people on different trajectories against each other, shoulder to shoulder as they fight for conflicting goals. When I am regurgitated from these soulless structures, the weather and light conditions that I left behind perhaps only minutes earlier always come as a slight shock. The idea of keeping a tab on which direction I've been walking in during all of this is beyond me.

But now I have my compass, my *boussole*. It reminds me of being a Scout, of weekends spent orienteering through dense Western Australian outback scrub, over granite boulders, and through shallow creeks, collecting ticks and tiny abrasions. Resting in the side pocket of my handbag and easy to reach, it gives me a sense of comfort and capability. Sometimes I put it in my coat pocket on the

train in preparation, then glance at it as I confidently dart up the stairs. It makes me feel like an explorer, navigating the urban jungle of the city. The metaphorical weight of having a compass to refer to doesn't escape me either. It literally points me in the right direction, tells me which way to go.

At 3am one Sunday morning, after stamping our feet for warmth on cold, cableless Rue Lafayette for half an hour, my friend and I decide to take *vélis*, the city's rental bikes, back to her house.

"But I'm not sure how to get home!" she laughs.

I look at the map in my head. "Well you live basically due north of here, so it should be easy," I say and we set off. The cold air bites at our exposed hands, and we alternate steering with one, then the other, finding temporary relief in the warmth of our pockets. My little compass fits easily in my palm, and I keep it pointed north as we navigate the now-quiet streets of outer Paris. Zooming down a steep hill near the peripherique, my friend cries out from behind me.

"Hang a larry at the lights!" I don't speak Canadian, but knowing we have drifted a little north-east, I zag left across the line of stopped taxis.

"What's right, just out of curiosity?" I ask when we have gotten rid of the bikes and are walking up her street.

"Roger!"

I file that away too.

It's a pretty primitive urge, to want to know and map your surroundings. As if knowing and plotting them will prevent bad things from happening, or help predict future events. Yet, each small piece of knowledge I add to the map in my brain makes me feel more secure, the ground beneath me more steady. I've arrived in a world where traffic goes in the wrong direction, the sun traces a different path across the sky, and nightfall can vary by up to five hours depending on the time of the year. So I lie in bed at night studying my quickly dog-eared map book of Paris, willing the unfamiliar names of streets and boulevards and squares

to soak into my grey matter. For months, I'll have two maps on my walls: one a true, to-scale geographical map that marks arrondissements and major monuments, the other the distorted, elaborate spider web of the transport system.

Every time someone tells me where they live or work, my eyes flick skywards, looking into my brain to locate it. My smartphone marks the location of every photo I take and watching over months and years the number of bright red pin heads explode all over the city and the rest of Europe thrills me. I have been here, I know this street, I bear witness. Each new building, cafe, restaurant, or apartment visited is another piece in the puzzle, an ever-growing complex image of a city I moved to on little more than a whim.

It was perhaps inevitable then, that eventually, I would become a tour guide. Riding a bike or Segway through the city day after day gives me a deeper sense of orientation and connection with the city than I'd had even before, and the stories I share on tour grow from a series of disjointed historical anecdotes I'd hastily memorized into a narrative about a city I've grown to know so well, yet barely at all. The tourists and I jump back and forward in time as I conjure the ghosts of long-gone Parisians, from revolution to Republic, from prehistory to the future, and all that keeps it together is the idea that where we are standing is somehow still linked to what has passed. Every step we take was in the footprint of the millions of people who have been before us, and no one story that I tell is ever the completely true whole.

A city as dense and old and fascinating as Paris can have no one history, no one story. So what I offer is by no means definitive or complete, and is completely subjective to my experience. The city I present to you as 'Paris' maybe utterly unrecognizable to that of my neighbour. So I make no claim that this is a history book or guide book. But I do claim it to be true, and to be mine.

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