

an american in paris

Karen K. Ford goes to Paris and gets the best haircut of her life.

“So get your hair cut in Paris!” said my friend, Jane, as if it were obvious. She poured herself another margarita from the communal pitcher.

For weeks before my impending European vacation, I had been growing out my short haircut, forgetting that when my hair is longer than a matchstick, it sucks down against my scalp and makes me look like a pinhead. I came to my senses at a bon voyage gathering, but by then, of course, there was no time to do anything about it.

The trouble with Jane’s suggestion was that my college French, unused to these many years, was probably inadequate to order lunch, much less instruct a stranger on my idiosyncratic (read: neurotic) notions about hair. Blame the tequila. One more drink and I found myself clinking glasses to my *coup parisien*.

On our third day in Paris my husband and I found Coiffure Line, a small place near our hotel, pleasantly but not slickly decorated, and bustling with activity at ten o’clock in the morning. The vibes were good; I made an appointment in my halting French for three that afternoon.

When I returned later that day, my first impression was that I’d made a terrible mistake. One stylist was doing a comb-out on a sixtyish woman with silver hair, while another used an electric razor to put the finishing touches on a man’s flat-top. Nearby another curled “bluehair” dozed beneath a humming dryer hood. I considered leaving but caught sight of my reflection. How much worse could it be?

I’d brought a photo of myself on a very good hair day. The idea wasn’t so much to duplicate the cut, but to say, “See? My hair is capable of better things.”

Dominique, my stylist, looked at it and called the other stylist over. They discussed the picture in rapid French, pushing my hair this way and that, clucking and tsking over my head. Dominique asked me a question I couldn’t even decipher, let alone answer. I smiled and shrugged. After three tries she gave up. Shaking her head dubiously, she tilted me back into the shampoo bowl.

Once I was in the chair it was time to broach the one subject I wanted more than anything to convey: the concealment of my bald spots. Robert (my stylist) and Sid (my husband) have been telling me for years that they’re figments of my imagination, but I swear that there are two quarter-sized spots, just aft of my temples, where the hair is embarrassingly sparse. I’d looked up the word “bald” in my French-American dictionary before coming in: *chauve*. Now I tried, in my dismal French, to communicate what turned out to be a rather sophisticated concept. It was Dominique’s turn to smile and shrug. I tried again. Still nothing.

In desperation I lifted my hair and pointed to the spots. “*lci!*” I said emphatically. “*lci il y a presque rien de cheveux!*”

Now her eyes went wide with something like shock. Oh God, I thought. Did I just say “hair” or “horses?” I might have been saying to the poor woman, “Here! Here there is almost nothing of horses!”

I did manage to get across a few things in French. “It is not necessary to make it look exactly like the picture.” She knows. “It is not possible to make it too short here (the crown) or here (the bangs).” She’s got it. Using texturing shears, she began her first tentative cuts.

I looked over at the bluehair, now seated in the chair next to me. Her curlers had been removed, leaving neat rows of tiny mounds, like a newly planted field. Had she been in an American salon, I imagined that the next step would have been to tease them into submission, rattling and foofing with a tailcomb, before blasting away with an industrial-strength hair spray. But this was Paris. The stylist combed the hair out almost straight, the set giving it just enough body to hold a pageboy wave. When she’d finished, the woman had a chic, sideswept bob. French women, I thought admiringly. For the first time, I began to relax.

I looked back at my own reflection just as Dominique was finishing the first pass around my skull. I could see where she was going, and I loved it: the way it framed my face, the way it seemed to make the most of the fine texture. I began to smile. Dominique smiled and started cutting more aggressively, sending swatches of brunette hair flying. When she was finished I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was me, but it wasn’t me. It was me with good hair. No—great hair. The best hair I’ve ever had.

“*Très joli!*” I said as she finished. “*J’aime beaucoup!*” She was smiling broadly now as the other stylist came over to admire the job. I joked that I’d have to come back to Paris for every haircut, but she didn’t understand. I told her it was the best haircut I’d ever had. This she got.

As I stepped out onto the Rue Dauphine, I felt better than good; I felt downright French. Rounding a corner, I actually turned the head of a young man for the first time since arriving in Paris. *C’est magnifique, non?*



Photography: John Springer Collection/CORBIS

Genevieve Page and Catherine Deneuve having a good hair day in *Belle de Jour*