

## Quick Thinking

“See you tomorrow.” With a valedictory wave Francoise closed the door of the taxi which her friend Elena had just boarded. It was a dark autumnal evening in Paris in the mid-sixties.

The taxi was filthy. It smelled foul. A malodorous cocktail of Gauloises, sweat and garlic. Elena shifted gingerly on the sticky seat fabric.

“Where to?” the driver asked without turning his head.

“22 Rue Jacob in the sixth *arrondissement* please.”

The taxi driver turned round and said, “I didn’t get that, can you repeat it?”

He was middle-aged, olive-skinned with patchy stubble and snaggly, nicotine-stained teeth. Elena thought he was probably from North Africa.

She gave him her address again and felt the first flutterings of anxiety as he did not move off immediately. He continued to look her up and down and in a rasping voice asked, “You’re not French? Where you from?”

“I’m a student from Rumania. I’m at the Sorbonne.”

“Ah, Rumania. I’ve heard you girls like to have a good time. What do you say we take a detour through the Bois de Boulogne and have a little fun together? Afterwards, I’ll run you over to Rue Jacob for free.”

He quickly pulled away from the kerb and the taxi gathered speed. With her mind in turmoil her only thought was to escape. She yanked violently at the door handle but it was locked. She tried to quell her rising panic and stifled the scream that was lodged in her throat. In a moment of clarity she remembered the last thing her mother had said before she left, “Always pause to think before you act.”

So she pushed her terror aside and said as firmly and confidently as she could in halting French,

“ *Monsieur*, you need to know that my friend she take the number of your car. She rings me in half-an-hour to check that I’ve got home safely. We always do this because Paris is very dangerous at the moment with the Algerian situation.”

The driver muttered several guttural imprecations and drove on without saying another word. With a huge sense of relief Elena noted that they were heading

away from the notorious Bois de Boulogne. Crossing Pont Neuf she felt a visceral sense of relief and moments later they pulled into her street. He slammed on the brakes released the rear door locks and shouted, "Get out  *salope stupide!*"

He roared away and as she stood pale and shaking by the kerb, Elena felt utter relief but also a sense of pride at her resourcefulness. She thought, "*I've just turned eighteen and I'm on my first trip abroad. Coming up with the story about Françoise checking the car's registration was pretty smart. He was not to know I made it up and we'd never thought to do this.*"

She learnt from her mistake. For the remainder of her time in Paris Elena made sure that she and her friends adopted this simple security measure every time they took a taxi.