

Story by SUZANNE WHITE
Illustrated by PETE GERGELY
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Illustrated by Pete Gergely
Layout and Design by Cheryl Perez

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No guinea pigs were harmed in the making of this book.

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Today I am in love.

With a wig.

Last February, in the provincial city of Draguignan-en-Provence, at the *Institut Capillaire Salon*, located in a 500 year old apartment, one rickety flight up, a woman named Danièle offered me a slew of prosthetic head coverings. Danièle is a thin, brittle lady of 58 whose husband recently defected. She's not on top form. She trembles as she combs the polyester strands of her wigs into suitable *coiffures*. She grooms them. Then she wiggle-slides the wigs, one after the other, down over her customers' bare heads.

It was Tuesday. I was still in residence at the lovely country convalescent *Clinique des Espérels*. I'd been given a morning's furlough to drive my own car to town for appointments. At 9:25 I met Jean, my Draguignan hairdresser, pacing the courtyard in front of his salon, smoking and talking on his cell.



He saw me., ended his phone call, scolded me for being 25 minutes late, put out his cigarette and invited me to come inside. “It’s freezing out here.” I sat. Jean snipped. As he did so, he nattered on about how we would deal with my *problème*.

Jean Astijiano, my favorite hairdresser, is *Provençal* French, which is not French Provincial. It’s *faux* Italian. Jean is Italian the way Al Capone was American. His Italian grandparents emigrated to Provence. So he’s French *Provençal* — of Italian descent. Jean has a southern French accent that I can’t reproduce here. It hits nasal sounds like the end of the word *matin* (for morning) as though they were made of sheet metal. “Tomorrow morning” (*demain matin*) sounds like *demaing mataing*. Each word ends with that rattle for which sheet metal is so famous. Jean is a Taurus. In Chinese astrology, Jean is a garrulous Rat. He doesn’t talk. He yaks. Rat-a-tat tat. Constantly. “I have a new husband,” he whispers in my one ear - *and out the other*. I gaze past my half-bald head in the gilt-framed mirror before me and shudder. The gaudy wall colors reflected there are so distinctively *Draguignan*.

“What’s his name?” I must appear curious about Jean’s new husband. In 20 years of coming to Jean for all my hair issues, I had waded through a fair number of his conquests and likewise, he mine. We are on familiar verb form terms. “You still think I’m the best hairdresser in Christendom?” he wondered.

“*Naturellement*,” I answered. And it’s true. I have lived in Paris, New York, San Francisco and Buenos Aires. Yet here in pokey old Draguignan, which is anything but *chic Provence*, the best hairdresser on the globe, my secret weapon, plies his trade. In Draguignan, there are 74 hairdressers. That’s for only 30,000 people. *Big Hair* is everywhere. There’s even a

hairdresser in Draguignan called *Self Coiffure*. I have often asked myself how that works. Is it like a self-service cafeteria? You place your head on a tray and slide it along a set of smooth metal bars till you reach the sink and then the *Self coiffing* begins? Beats me.

Jean is the Pied Piper of Draguignan hairdressers. He has not always been with the same salon. But whither goest Jean Asitjiano and his magic scissors around this town, the women of *Le Tout Draguignan* slavishly follow.

Poor Draguignan. She is an ancient city with a deep and magical history. *Ducs* and *Duchesses* - nobles of every stripe and rank danced and daggered through the streets of the old walled city for eons before some clodhopping 20th century politicians tarted it up with monuments to bad taste. Nowadays, awkward sculptures, clumsy statues and dead-in-the water fountains crowd the too many roundabouts where rampaging drivers, rev and *vroom* day and night. It's a busy little city. The farmer's market stalls on Wednesday and Saturdays foam with fresh produce, olive oils, local goat cheeses, multicolored olives and easy-drinking *rosés de Provence*. Draguignan is warm and sunny and convivial. But Paris or New York or San Francisco or Buenos Aires... Draguignan is decidedly not.

"His name is Frédéric," said Jean, smiling at me in the mirror. "But I call him Fred." He winked.

"Is he a real husband?" I asked. It was a disingenuous question. "Are you ... married?"

"*Bien sûr que non!*" Jean assured me. "Of course not." Then added, "Anyway, it's against the law."

"Just as well," I replied. "Marriage isn't exactly your style."

Jean laughed out loud. As he doesn't own the chintz-festooned pink and purple salon where he's working now, I can't hold him responsible for the garish color scheme. Here at *LaTiffa Coiffures*, Jean is an employee. He did run his own tastefully overdone red plush and golden-curtained salon some years back. But when the banker lover split, Jean lost his financing.

He stops snipping, stares at me for a sec and says, "My new husband is actually kind of chubby. I mean he's big. And strong." Jean holds the scissors wide open over my head and glances in the mirror at the result of his work. "Okay. So Fred's a little fat. But he's a nurse's aide. He's so kind. He loves me. I love him." Jean sucks in some air. "... And he cooks!"

"Maybe you should just shave it off," I said with a shrug, returning the subject to what remained of my hair. "What's the use of these spiky tufts?"

"Don't ask me to. I would never shave anyone's head - yes maybe a guy - a younger gay guy... if he was cute - but you don't shave a woman. Too brutal. Too shocking. This way the hair still falls out. But it goes gradually. You know it's going. But because it's so short, it doesn't leave great swarms and strands on your lover's chest or in the kitchen sink." The skin around Jean's eyes crinkled. Jean thinks he's funny. I am 71 and currently loverless.

He scissored my hair to half an inch everywhere. I looked like a *tondue*, one of those French women they sheared bald after the war for having copulated with a handsome German or three. The color? Blonde and white mixed. Like beer.

Jean charged me 21 euros and urged me hurry on over to the wig salon where I was expected at 10. "Avoid wearing navy blue and black." He said, "Short white hairs show up as dandruff on those colors." I scooted out the door.

I hurried along to the *Institut Capillaire*. At the top of the stairs, I was welcomed by the stout, odiferous Portuguese cleaning lady who was vacking up the tile floors. Pleasant surprise. She did not smell of the characteristic Portuguese *concierge* dried salt cod I had come to know so well in Paris in the 20th century. This cleaning person's fragrance was either Opium by Saint-Laurent or Guerlain's Shalimar. Heady. Dense. It blended effectively with and masked the chemical odor of the tile cleaner in the yellow bucket at her feet.

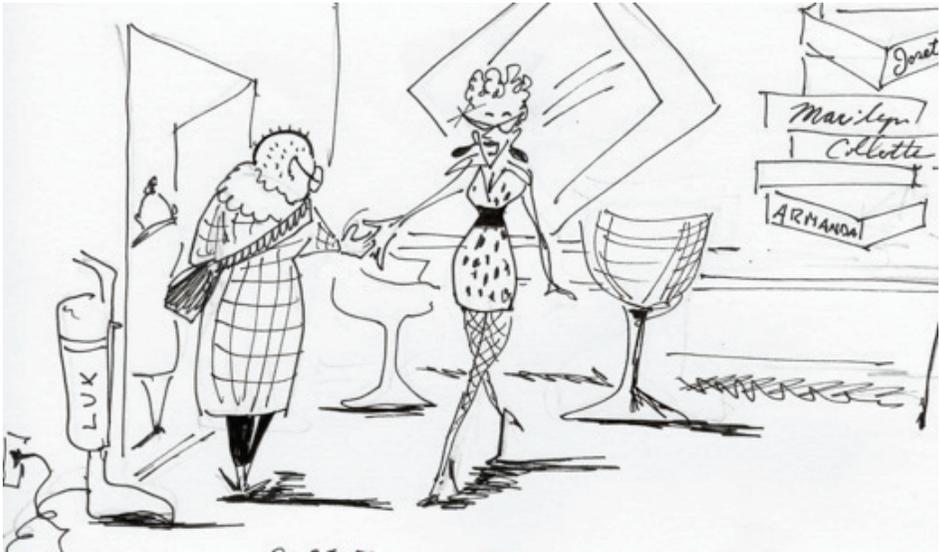
Sponge mops are not the custom in France. To clean our deep red *Provençal* tiles, you vacuum first and then wash with a large dingy wet waffle-weave rag called a *serpillière* that you first soak in a mixture of super hot water and tile-cleaning product. Then you pinch up the near-scalding, soaking-wet rag with two fingers and wrap it loosely around the business end of a brush screwed to a broom handle. To wash and shine the tiles, you swoop this contraption around all the floors. The way you drape the rag around the brush is crucial. You must leave some flaps of the cloth free to thwack about as you swish and swirl across the ceramic floors. Those exposed flapping bits are expected to creep into the crannies of your room of their own volition and lap up the dirt. When you reckon the *serpillière* is filthy enough, you remove it from the brush and dunk it into the bucket a few times. Then you wring it out with burning bare hands and whack it back onto the brush-broom gizmo. This novel deck-swabbing system is traditionally used on tiles floors all over France. It works a treat.

“We're cleaning,” said the cleaning woman.

I had gathered that, so I stepped gingerly over the bunched wet *serpillière* she'd left on the top step and walked into a small zig-zaggy apartment. A minimal space had been further minimized by breaking it into

2.5 tiny rooms. Whipped cream peaks of plaster held years of gritty dust on the walls. The floor was covered in typical, authentic 500-year-old hexagonal Salernes *tomettes* tiles. Some of the looser tiles clanked and crunched as I walked through the foyer into the shop. “*Bonjour!*” I called out. “*Danièle est là?*”

Danièle came forward and identified herself. “*Je suis Danièle,*” she said.



“*Bonjour. Je suis Suzanne White.*”

“*Bonjour Madame White,*” shrilled Danièle. We shook ladylike hands.

We would be just the two of us, she explained. The boss, Pascal, whom I had met the previous Saturday, was fitting wigs in two nearby hospitals. Danièle gestured I should precede her into one of the tiny roomlets, where I settled into a modern design barber chair in front of a skew-gee diamond-shaped mirror.

To my right was a wall of white cardboard shoeboxes. They all had names: Colette, Patty, Juliette, Denise, Marilyn. And color labels: ash