

## **Savoir-Faire**

**By Robert M. Grossman**

I can see my hand jabbing in the wind as I hitchhiked from Nice to Paris that August day. It was overcast by noon after my early morning departure under clear skies. The rain was sure to come soon. I had hoped to reach Paris by nightfall, but nightfall was likely to greet me no more than halfway. I had been alone in seeking rides so far, but after being dropped off on the outskirts of Saint Vallier, I soon observed another hitchhiker ahead of me. On top of that it began to drizzle.

My competitor and I stared at each other and instinctively edged closer. He was about the same age, but his English, it turned out, was much better than my French. He was also on his way to Paris, and we quickly agreed that it made more sense for us to seek a ride together than compete apart. My new companion – his name was Jacques – seemed more attuned to hitchhiking, so I stood behind him as he thrust his thumb northward, smiling slightly at the oncoming cars.

“One will soon stop,” he said.

“How can you tell?”

“The French are not as distrustful as they seem, and we may actually look inviting to a lonely driver.”

Indeed, within minutes a four-door Citroen pulled over and the driver waved us in. He

spoke little English so Jacques and he conversed for the next several hours as I hunched over in the back seat trying to keep warm. The driver, who seemed a much older man, was probably only in his late thirties. Even though I barely understood what he was saying, his accent made him sound intelligent. I would later learn that he was an architect -- which was of particular interest to Jacques since that was what he was studying to be.

It was still raining when we arrived in Dijon. Our driver, who knew of a youth hostel where he'd stayed before, drove there through the rain to see if any rooms were available. There was one left with just two beds, a double big enough for two of us and a narrow straw mat on the floor. I immediately told myself I would doubtless end up sleeping with one of them.

During the three hour ride to Dijon, I periodically dreamed of the dinner I craved. I assumed my colleagues would join me, but the driver, who by then I knew as "Pierre," had brought along some bread and cheese to eat in the room. He wanted to share them with us and Jacques took him up on it. I was determined to find a good French meal, even if meant getting rained on. Pierre offered to drive me to a restaurant he knew of nearby. He even said he'd pick me up afterwards at a given time. I told him not to bother. He was surely tired after a long day's drive, and I would need to walk off my meal regardless of the rain.

After a dinner of foie gras and sole meuniere, fortified by a fine half bottle of wine which Pierre suggested I try, I made my way back to the room. To my surprise and relief, my confreres were ensconced together in the double bed. The straw mat had been left for me.

I slept soundly and the next morning Jacques and I were standing together at the bathroom sink.

“How did you sleep?” I asked.

“O.K.,” he replied.

“It was so good of you to leave the mat for me. How did Pierre sleep?” Pierre  
had left the room for the moment.

Jacques smiled. “He approached me,” he said nonchalantly.

“Approached you?” I asked.

“Yes. He approached me.” He said with a smile.

I slowly but finally understood what he meant. “You mean he’s a homosexual?”  
To my knowledge, I’d never seen one.

“Yes.”

“What did you do?” I said with astonishment and alarm.

“I told him I was not interested. Then I rolled over and went back to sleep. So did he.”

As much as I wanted him to think I would have done the same, I couldn’t contain the truth.  
“Good God. I would have leapt out of bed and run into the rain.”

“Ah, my American friend,” he said. “You must develop a little *savoir-faire*.”

Jacques said nothing more about what happened. We decided it was now best to take the train from Dijon to Paris. After breakfast, at which Pierre spoke to Jacques at length on the developing architecture in Europe and America, he offered to drive us to the railroad station. As he dropped us off, Jacques shook hands with him, as did I, somewhat hesitantly, and we raced to buy our coach tickets.

The train ride took several hours so we had plenty of time to talk, but Jacques never brought up the subject of Pierre. For my part, I decided not to raise it unless Jacques did. But as I gazed at the countryside for long periods, Pierre was very much in my thoughts. He seemed just like us. He wasn't that strange or odd creature I imagined. He was kind and thoughtful. He was also apparently a knowledgeable and accomplished architect. How curious, I thought -- I might even learn from him.

That August day was in 1953. I was then one of those young American students who came to college in the aftermath of the Second World War and in the midst of the McCarthy, red-baiting era. The Supreme Court had not yet decided *Brown vs. Board of Education* and gays were still in the closet. I was experiencing my first European adventure over the summer of my sophomore year in college.

It has been sixty years since then, but if I were now abroad as a nineteen-year-old, perhaps I, too, instead of darting into the rain, may have just casually told him to lay off, then rolled over and gone back to sleep -- and learned much from him about the current trends in architecture at breakfast the next morning. Perhaps, I, too, after sixty years of growing up, may have developed a little “*savoir-faire*.”

