



Edith Piaf

“La Vie en rose”

Chansons parisiennes

1947

Columbia

Votre Chanson

Reynold Junker

Paris isn't usually this cold at Christmas, but this had been a record-breaking winter for cold *and* snow. It had snowed on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day but now the snow, the midnight mass services, the New Years Eve fireworks, and my two-week stay on the Ile Saint Louis were over and done. All that was left was the bitter wind off the Seine and a forecast for freezing rain.

For any number of reasons, weather included, I'd tried to talk myself out of this trip to Paris, a city where I knew no one and where my French consisted largely of *Parlez Vous Anglais?* and stumbling through menu choices. And this time I'd been alone, without her. I'd be returning to California tomorrow, but for now I had a promise to keep.

I'd spent my two weeks in Paris wandering, doing things and visiting places we, she and I, had done and visited so many times in the past. Down the Boulevard Saint Germain, into Les Deux Magots, Café de Flore and Le Procope, not having her to help with the language; through the courtyard and past I.M. Pei's Pyramide at the Louvre; into the gardens at the Tuileries and Luxembourg, reaching for her hand and not finding it; through the Marais and the square at the Place des Vosges and into the cafes Ma Bourgogne and Hugo, sitting and listening for her voice and not hearing it; through the streets of Les Halles and its café Au Pied de Cochon. In at least one guidebook I knew of, Au Pied de Cochon is cited as the heart of Paris. For us, she and I, Paris had many hearts, Au Pied de Cochon's being just one of them.

Now I was crossing the bridge over the Seine between Notre Dame and Ile Saint Louis, returning late from dinner at a little Latin Quarter brasserie. Despite my truss-belted and fleece lined raincoat, tweed cap, gloved hands and scarf pulled up against my chin, the cold cut through me as I hurried along while the stars and street lamps, which always seem to fill the Paris night, shone through and against what otherwise would have been empty darkness. I heard music coming from the other side.

The accordionist sat on a small wooden stool, muffled and hood-bundled against the cold. He wore fingerless gloves and was key-fingering seemingly random scale bellows chords. There were several small coins in the cloth cap at his feet—not much for a long night's work. I reached into my pocket, pulled out two two-euro pieces and dropped them into the cap; they dwarfed the rest of the coins.

"*Votre chanson?*" he said, in a hoarse muffled voice barely above a whisper.

"*Pardon?*" I asked. "*Je ne parle pas bien le Francais.*" Sorry, I don't speak French very well. My words came out in short frosted gasps.

"*Votre chanson?*" he repeated. "Your song?"

Without hesitation, almost by reflex, "*Hier Encore,*" I responded. "*Charles Aznavour.*"

Even by French standards, *Hier Encore* is a sad song. It tells the story of a man recalling his youth, recalling waste, selfishness, foolishness, and loss. It begins, "Yesterday when I was young, the taste of life was sweet as rain upon my tongue." It ends, "and only I am left on stage to end the play. I feel the bitter taste of tears upon my tongue." I couldn't tell

when *Hier Encore* had become *my* song, but I could tell why—it reminded me of my life before *her*.

The accordionist shook his head, "*Non*."

"*Oui*," I insisted. "*Hier Encore. Charles Aznavour*."

"*Non*," he countered. "*Piaf, Edith, la mome piaf, the little sparrow*."

"*Piaf, Edith Piaf*," I hesitated, memory searching, before, the words tumbled out. "*La Vie en rose. Alors*." Edith Piaf, *La Vie en rose*, then.

La Vie en rose begins with the plea, "Hold me close and hold me fast," and ends with the final plea, "Give *your* heart and soul to me." *La Vie en rose* is a prayer.

He nodded, shift-settled his keyboard into his chest, embracing it, smiled, and treble and bass fingered keys and tabs.

I waited through the first verse, then, footsteps echoing against the stone walls of the bridge, headed down the steep shadowed steps to the moss wet footpath that winds alongside the Seine. I'd be able to hear the rest from down there.

From the bottom of the steps I listened first to him finish *La Vie en rose*, then to the silence of the Paris night and my own breathing. I could feel the chill of that empty night surround me and the cold damp of the wet cobblestones push up into and through the soles of my shoes. I pulled off my gloves, blew into my hands and reached into my raincoat pocket for the small container I'd carried to Paris—the reason I'd come to Paris. Fingers cold, stiff-aching, I removed the screw top, held the container at arm's length, tilted it outward and, keeping my promise, spilled her ashes into the Seine. Now, as promised, she'd be part of Paris and the Seine and Paris and the Seine would be part of her.

"Give your heart and soul to me," I whispered, praying into the empty night. Then I turned away from the river and retraced my path back up the steps to the bridge.