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Annabelle Thong

A Novel



**IMRAN
HASHIM**

Annabelle Thong

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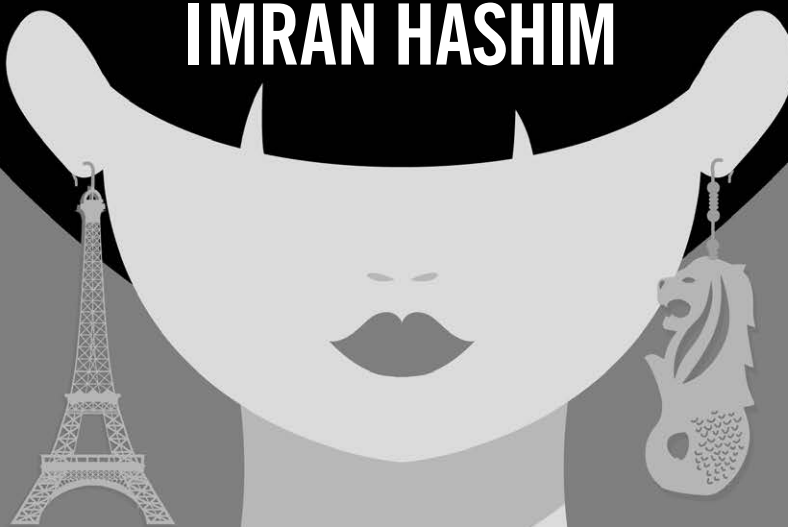
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Annabelle Thong

A Novel

IMRAN HASHIM



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EPIGRAM BOOKS
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For Mak and Abah, for letting me be

Prologue

9th August 2006

(In response to Mr Brown's "I am Singaporean" meme.)

I SHARE MY first name with Singapore's world-famous (and only) porn star and my Chinese surname with a piece of lingerie, but I've only been on five dates my entire life, none of them sexy. I've been in love once when I was 17; he never knew and is now married to my ex-best friend.

I am already 28.

I'm a history teacher in a boys' school, and derive a guilty pleasure when my pimply boys ogle me. They're the only people in the world who make me feel beautiful. Well, them and insurance agents.

I'm a loyal subscriber to *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*, and follow all their advice, unless it contradicts the Pope. Inspired by one of their articles, I shed five kilos of baby fat when I was 25; I am proud to say that I am now no longer fat, just big-boned.

I want to fall in love again (but requited this time), and get married and have a family. I *want* to do what the government tells us and have lots of babies, but the men I meet, at work or in church, are either too young, or too old, or too married, and none of them are interested in me anyway.

I am sick of having to compete with Singaporean Olympic dieters on the one hand and submissive Vietnamese mail-order brides on the other. I am tired of being told I am too choosy when there's nothing for me to choose from. And most of all,

I'm fed up with Singaporean men, whose idea of macho is a set of six-pack abs born of liposuction.

My name is Annabelle Thong. I am Singaporean. And I need to get out of this country.

So say we all. So say we all.

Chapter 1

NATURE IS CALLING loud and clear, but I can't bring myself to ask Monsieur for permission and so I hold my pee.

It's my first day and I'm quivering in my pants, toilet issues notwithstanding. What am I doing here? My French is so bad; how in the world did I think I was going to get away with doing a master's degree *at the Sorbonne*? Sure, there seems to be a sizeable group of foreign students in the course but they're mostly European, and so multilingual it makes me want to swear (in Hokkien). I steal glances around the room to check out my classmates. They seem cool and relaxed, like they've got it all together. Some of them are already making friends, speaking to one another in low voices. Urgh.

Monsieur Stempin, our Philosophy tutor, clears his throat, causing me to sit up straight and pay attention again. "*Bon!* I've gone through the discussion topics for the semester. We have a bit of time left, so I'd like you to introduce yourselves to the class. You can tell us where you're from and why you've chosen this course. Who wants to start?"

As a former teacher with five years of teaching experience under her belt, it seems obvious to me that the answer to this question is nobody. Nobody ever wants to start. You have to call on... Oh. Someone has raised a hand. Interesting.

"*Bonjour*, my name is Ursula Andersson and I'm from Sweden," says this blonde, blue-eyed bombshell (how clichéd). "I have a bachelor's degree in French Literature from Stockholm

University, where I did a thesis on Molière and his political satire. I was working as a journalist before coming here and I hope this course will sharpen my skills in political analysis.”

“Excellent! And based on my presentation just now, do you have any concerns or questions?”

Ursula puts the tip of her pen to her pouty lips and pauses as she considers. “I guess my only concern is that my French may be a bit too literary,” then hastens to add, “but I’ll try my best to adjust my register to one more appropriate to political science.”

“*Très bien, Mademoiselle Andersson.* Your French is excellent, and I’m sure you won’t have any trouble adapting. Now, how about the young lady over there?” He points to a rather pretty girl of indeterminate origin, with straight, long black hair and beautiful almond-shaped eyes.

“I am call Gula. I come from Uzbekistan! I get a scholarship from my government. My father is Minister of Education. My mother is housewife. I come to the Sorbonne because I like to study international relationships.” She pauses and scans the room with an assertive, steady gaze. “Any questions?” Everyone shakes their head in silence and shuffles their papers, including M. Stempin.

“*Bien...*and you,” he says, regaining his professor’s composure, “please tell us about yourself.” He is speaking to a tall, nervous-looking blond guy with Harry Potter glasses.

“*Bonjour.* My name is Yannick Catteau, and I’m from Holland. I just graduated from Utrecht University, and my goal is to do a PhD here after my master’s.”

“*Très bien.* Did you say you’re from Holland? You sound like a native French speaker.”

Yannick explains that his father is French, thus resolving the mystery. We move on to a French girl, Sophie, and then Urban, a German anarchist-type figure with so many piercings on his face, he looks like he’s going for a Star Trek convention. He’s doing research into the “social ecology of French inner cities and their dehumanising effects on third-generation immigrants” and

spent the whole of last year living in the Parisian *banlieue*, the inner cities, which explains his impeccable (by my standards) French.

The pressure is on! M. Stempin is now just mechanically going down the row and I’m next. Oh God, I need something impressive to say, but what? Come on Belle, say something smart, say something smart...

“*Bonjour, everyone!*” I trill, hoping that friendliness will compensate for incompetence. “My name is Annabelle. I come from Singapore. Talk to me later to know more. I need to go to toilet. That’s all. Thanks, everybody!”

OH MY GOD. I am so ridiculous.

My mum had warned me about going to Paris for further studies. Well, maybe not so much warned as tried to prevent me from leaving Singapore. Back in March when I first announced to my parents I had been accepted to do a master’s at the Sorbonne, Dad was suitably impressed and encouraging, but Mum couldn’t understand why I was going to France, much less to study politics. Her initial argument was that “France doesn’t have any famous politicians like Lee Kuan Yew”, and, in a leap of logic, tried to convince me to do an MBA in Singapore instead. “Look at Crystal,” she said, pointing to my sister. “She studied business and has so many nice banker friends now.”

But I was not to be deterred, and gave her all the reasons it was imperative for me to go to France:

- a) I had never lived away from home and this would be an enriching experience that would help me personally develop into a fully functional adult.
- b) After five years of French lessons, I had only been to France once on a short holiday, and this was the best way for me to finally become fluent in the language.
- c) It would be good for my teaching career.
(I didn’t tell her the real reason of course, i.e. that I was hoping to find the love of my life in the City of Light,

as I didn't want to reveal myself as a desperate old-maid figure and therefore a failure.)

All of this was pure nonsense to her and she mounted a relentless psychological campaign to undermine my resolve for weeks until I finally found her Achilles heel:

d) The Sorbonne is a brand-name university, quite like Oxford and Harvard, and would allow me to meet members of the international elite. (I believe my actual words to my mother were “*other* members of the international elite” and she suddenly saw the light.)

But she still had reservations about my ability to cope, reservations that I swept aside in my excitement to go. I believed in myself, and this morning, as I set foot in the university for the first time, I couldn't help but feel rather special. Vindicated. I mean, there I was, walking through the Sorbonne's hallowed corridors, following in the footsteps of St Francis Xavier, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Pierre and Marie Curie! (To be fair, I must include Pol Pot in this list but have resolved to be nothing like him.) So if the university has decided to bring me into its fold, surely it must mean that I can do this?

The next item on my schedule is a briefing held by the International Relations sub-department. With the guide of a map, I make my way towards Room 4 along Corridor F, noticing as I go along how suitably ancient and musty it is inside the building. Out of curiosity, I pop my head into a lecture theatre and see lots of wood and old paintings of bare-breasted women, which can only confirm the Sorbonne's position as an exalted seat of European learning.

At the end of the IR briefing, we introduce ourselves again, but I'm better prepared this time and do a decent job. Yet, when the subject coordinator, M. Blois, asks if anybody will be taking French lessons, everybody looks at me. Did I overdo the exotic accent? It's supposed to make me look alluring, not stupid! M. Blois also asks me what kind of primary sources I intend to acquire for my thesis research. Primary sources? I thought I was going to be reading books

for my dissertation! So I say, erm, I haven't really thought about it yet... And it seems that my dissertation should be about 100 pages long. Isn't that for the PhD? What the hell am I going to be nattering on about for 100 pages?

When M. Blois announces a short tea break, I heave a sigh. Maybe Mum was right and I've made a mistake. I thought I could do this, but it's obvious now that I can't. How am I supposed to learn everything in French when I can't even understand half of what my teachers are saying? They speak so fast! I mean, I can't even understand instructions and have to resort to asking my classmates questions like: “When does he want us to sign up for tutorials?” and “Is it my bad French or did he say we have to do *five* assignments for his class?” Why, oh why did University Admissions ever let me in?

“*Salut, ça va?*” A voice snaps me out of my head. “Is everything okay?” It's one of my classmates, an Arab guy by the looks of it. I do my best to look surprised by his question.

“Me? Of course I'm okay. Why shouldn't I be?” I give him a big, earnest, toothy smile, realising how manic I must seem yet totally unable to control myself. “I'm great. Great, great. And you? Are *you* okay?”

He raises an eyebrow at me and then starts to laugh. “Yes, I am actually.” He holds out a languid hand for me to shake. “I'm Zaid, but people call me Didi.”

I give him a quick head-to-toe glance. Hmm...good-looking guy, and impeccably dressed—Burberry with a dash of Prada. Ooh! Maybe he's part of the Sorbonne's international elite! The son of some Middle Eastern despot, no doubt. How exciting.

“*Je m'appelle Annabelle,*” I say, making sure to pronounce my name the French way. “I come from Singapore. And you?”

“*Oh je suis français,*” he says breezily. “My family lives in Marseille.”

I'm not quite ready to give up on the idea of hobnobbing with Arabian royalty, so I clarify the question. “But where do you come *from*? Originally?”

“I’m originally from France. I was born here. But if you insist on knowing, my grandfather fought for the French in the Algerian War, the Algerians killed his brothers in revenge, he escaped to France hopping on his one remaining leg and voilà, here I am.”

Oh dear, how awkward. I can’t believe I made someone I’ve just met dig up his family tragedy. He must think I’m so rude!

“What a success story!” I chirp merrily, wracking my brains for more pleasant topics of conversation. “That’s nice... So, it’s really nice to be here, isn’t it? In this nice university?” I need to look up more French synonyms for “nice” but I thought congratulating ourselves on being in this “super university” would have been overkill.

Before I can embarrass myself further, someone else joins us, much to our relief. This guy is in his early thirties, with longish brown hair, blue eyes and sexy, just-got-out-of-bed overnight stubble. In fact, he’s *gorgeous*.

“*Bonjour, vous allez bien?*” he says. “I just got here, did I miss much?”

“No, not really,” I say. “Monsieur Blois just explained what the programme would be like.” Then, in an attempt to flash a bit of personality, I add in a stage whisper, “It was quite boring. I couldn’t stop imagining him in his pyjamas and a big hat. You know, like the wizard in Harry Potter.” I squint my eyes for dramatic effect.

The Gorgeous One looks suitably amused. “I would have gone with Marx,” he says.

I look at him, puzzled. “Richard Marx? But he doesn’t have a... (*what’s the word for beard?*)...moustache,” I say, stroking my chin.

“I think he means Karl,” Didi says.

An image of Karl Marx comes to me and to tell the truth, Blois does look more like him than Dumbledore (or Richard Marx for that matter). I can feel my face redden. *Annabelle! What were you thinking?! You’re no longer in Ricevale Secondary School,*

you’re in the Sorbonne for God’s sake! Get with the programme!

I mumble something unintelligible and give a weak smile. Holding out my hand to the Gorgeous One, I say, “My name is Annabelle, I come from Singapore. And you?”

He shakes my hand and flashes a boyish smile. “I’m Patrick.”

“Hello, Patrick. Excuse me, but I think I’ll go get myself some coffee,” I say, and slink away, never to come back.

It’s been a long and traumatising first day of school, and I can’t wait to get home. I walk briskly to the Saint Michel Metro station, where I take a direct train back to Château Rouge, in the 18th arrondissement of Paris. As the Line 4 train rumbles northwards, the whiteness of its carriages seeps away, and by the time we pull up at Château Rouge, the general complexion of my fellow commuters has darkened by a shade or five. I live in what Parisians call a “*quartier populaire*” or “popular neighbourhood”, but one must not be deceived by this backhanded compliment. For Parisian high society, “popular” equals “the masses” equals “working-class” equals “not-so-appealing-after-all”. Essentially, it’s not the preferred locale of the Parisian elite, who are not “popular” and, honestly, don’t want to be. But beggars can’t be choosers, and I have decided that I will not have any of this elitist nonsense as I cannot afford it. No, I’m determined to grow by pushing my comfort zone, to soak in the “ambience” and to love my neighbourhood with a vengeance. At least I’m not living in the *banlieue!*

I take the escalator out of the station and into the September afternoon sunshine. It’s a short seven-minute walk to my building, and en route, I pass by halal eateries (mostly kebab-type shops and an Indo-Pakistani chicken restaurant), 24-hour grocery shops, trinket shops and one Chinese fast-food restaurant, useful for pork-craving emergencies.

As I reach my building, I notice a group of teenage black girls marching down the road and one of them, a veritable Queen Latifah before her time, goes up to this geeky Arab boy (a classmate?) and

starts slapping him around. The boy begins to cry, and kicks at her ineffectually, while Queen Latifah's Nubian entourage try to restrain Her Majesty. All this takes place smack in the middle of a small cross junction; an adult passer-by tries to mediate, a security car doing its rounds has stopped, but the officer doesn't step out and just shouts at them from inside the car. There are lots of shouting and hip-hop R&B hand gestures from the kids, and on any other day I'd be interested to see what happens, but right now I'm just too drained, and press the security code on the right side of the door to enter the building.

It's an old building, with rickety stairs, but I like to think of it as more historical than ancient. I live on the sixth floor—seventh floor in Singapore—because here in Paris, the first floor is Level 0. I reach the staircase landing, look up the stairwell and sigh. Right now, I'd give my left leg for an elevator. I start to climb.

Thankfully, my studio apartment does not look as "historical" as the building it's in. It's small—21 square metres—but cosy. You can tell it's been recently renovated—everything looks quite new, except for the sofa bed, whose cover looks like it's an original design by a colour-blind engineer. I like the fact that the kitchen is in a corner, as opposed to being part of the main room like in many other studios that I've seen. And the toilet and shower are in the same space, which is a relief because the French tend to like toilets that are separate, usually with no tap to wash your hands at, so you're forced to exit the toilet to wash your hands, touching stuff along the way. I've been told that homes of rich people do have a washbasin in the toilet as well—which might leave one to conclude that, unlike liberty, fraternity and equality, the French do not consider hygiene to be a universal human right. The apartment also has a nice big French window. You can't quite see the Eiffel Tower from it—you'd have to live in an un-"*populaire*" neighbourhood like the 16th arrondissement for that—but being on a high floor I do get a view of the grey zinc rooftops of Paris, which has its own sweet charm.

I must say that I'm quite proud of my little pad, especially since

I had to go through hell to find it. Looking for a rental apartment in Paris at the beginning of the school year was no joke. It seemed like every other person in Paris was looking for a place. Whenever there was an apartment viewing, the queue was so long it would snake out of the building, even for flats without showers. Yes, there are flats without showers. *In Paris*. I wish I was rehashing some sort of cruel joke, some crazy urban legend, but I'm not. I know for a fact that such apartments exist because I queued up to look at one, partly out of curiosity, but mostly out of desperation.

And the process of house hunting was so competitive too, kind of like a job interview, but with even higher stakes. The smart candidates would dress to the nines to show they could afford the rent, and look the part of a responsible tenant. They came with folders chock-full of documents: passports, residency permits, work permits, pay slips, parents' pay slips, five years' worth of tax returns, birth certificates, marriage certificates, degree certificates and—this one takes the cake—CVs. Anything to make a good impression with the landlord. And the landlord would appraise you, look you up and down, and, sensing your desperation, ask all sorts of rude and impertinent questions about your lifestyle and habits. You answer his stupid questions with a grovelling smile and give him your folder before you leave, telling him how much you look forward to hearing from him. He takes the folder and says he will call, but he never does, and you spend an inordinate amount of time staring at the phone, willing it to ring, and wondering what the right answer was when he asked if you preferred dogs to cats.

But three days ago, I had a stroke of luck. I called an agent about an ad that I had seen, and she said the apartment viewing was taking place that very morning, 11am. Did I want to visit? YES! So I took my shower and rushed down to Château Rouge, which was not too far away from the hotel I was staying at.

When I arrived, I was stunned to see that there was only one other person looking at the apartment. He looked like he earned masses of money (the type real estate agents love best). Damn.

I tried to compensate for my low income by looking hyper-enthusiastic and in love with the studio. I even made cooing noises about the toilet and the gas stove but the agent was not impressed.

Mr Hotshot looked pensive the whole time we did the “tour” and finally said, “It’s just too small, have you got anything bigger?”

I went in for the kill. “Well, it’s just PERFECT for me. I’ll take it.”

The agent did not look too thrilled, but she had to earn her keep. The deal was sealed. I went down to the agency that very afternoon to do the paperwork to ensure that I would get the apartment. No time to lose. I went in at 2pm and only left at 4.30pm, after all had been explained and signatures were in place. I stumbled dizzily out of the agency and into the streets of Paris, clutching my rental agreement to my heart.

I moved in the next day, and recall the feeling of utter bliss and happiness after I had unpacked my stuff and put everything in its place. My first *chez moi!* My own place, complete with a private toilet and kitchen and front door I can lock. The feeling was just so awesome. Now, all I need is electricity. I’ll have to go to EDF to get that fixed ASAP.

I switch on my laptop to play some Sarah McLachlan, then move to the window to look at the sea of Parisian rooftops. I love how the sunset lingers here in Paris; so much dreamier than the two-minute now-you-see-me-now-you-don’t affairs we have on the equator. I sit on the windowsill, watching the lights slowly come on in the apartments across the street, and for the first time in a long, long time, I feel a sense of freedom, like I could shape my own destiny. Create. Build something out of this life. Be happy. The possibilities seem endless. All I need to do is follow my 10-point action plan, to be adhered to at ALL times.

10 Secrets of Beautiful Women

1. Beauty sleep (a minimum of seven to eight hours a night).
2. Moisturise, moisturise, moisturise (cannot remember which supermodel-sage said that).

3. Carbs are not your friends.
4. Go to the gym. It may be a chore, but it’s for your own good. (It’s like Sunday Mass, but with tangible rewards.)
5. When in doubt, wear black.
6. Always take your time. The world can wait until you’re good and ready.
7. Cultivate your inner beauty; European men like women of substance.
8. Play up the exotica factor; speak with a Chinese accent if necessary to spark a conversation.
9. Think that you’re beautiful. Once you become really good at this, graduate to point 10.
10. KNOW that you’re beautiful—self-confidence is the ultimate aphrodisiac.



It’s Sunday morning and since I still don’t have any electricity in the apartment, I go to the café downstairs for some breakfast and coffee. The interior of Café Roger is dark despite the abundance of sunlight outside, and everything has a depressing down-and-out feel about it, from the formica bar counter and PVC bar stools to the eponymous Roger himself. White-haired and unshaven, Roger wears a checked shirt over a grimy T-shirt that dreams of detergent, and chucks my croque monsieur in front of me rather unceremoniously before going back to the bar to continue a conversation with his only other customer, a large man with an anchor tattoo on his forearm. Roger says something about “foreigners” and how the neighbourhood has changed, and something else I don’t understand, but none of it sounds very welcoming. Oh dear. I bite politely into the croque monsieur, which looks about as freshly made as Roger, and try to tune them out.

Just as I'm about to finish, my phone rings, and I'm glad for the human interaction, even if it's only my mum. Mum has been uncharacteristically maternal since I left Singapore, calling me almost every other day to check if I'm settling in okay. And I appreciate the newfound attention; at least until the moment the conversation takes an acrimonious turn, as it invariably does.

"Hello, dear, how are you doing? What time is it over there?" I hear every syllable clearly and crisply across the oceans because Mum does not speak, she *e-nun*-ciates.

"Morning, Mum! It's 9.30 here, I'm just finishing breakfast," I say. "What's up?"

"Nothing's up, dear. I'm just calling to make sure everything is okay, since you never call. Have you gone for Mass? Today's Sunday, you know."

"Yes, I'll be going later. The Basilica Sacré Coeur has one at 6pm. I'm actually looking forward to it—the place looks beautiful in the postcards I've seen."

"You mean you still haven't gone for Mass since you set foot in France?" Mum says, scandalised.

"Mum, I've only been here about a week..."

"Eleven days, actually."

"Yes, but I've been really busy. And I'm going this evening, okay?"

"All right, just don't forget to go."

"How's Crystal? Has she got any news about the promotion?" I ask, hoping to change the subject. My mum loves to talk about Crystal, who is obviously her favourite between the two of us. My sister and I have this theory that it's Mum's way of atoning ever since she realised, too late and with a crashing horror, the consequences of her actions circa Singapore 1981. Mum had wanted her youngest daughter to be pure, beautiful and delicate, and therefore christened her Crystal Thong. And you couldn't blame her, really; the country was poor then, and panties still came in only one shape and three sizes.

"Yes, yes she has!" Mum gushes excitedly. "She's now an

Assistant Senior Vice-President for Investment Banking... Or is it Senior Assistant Deputy President? Well, it's one or the other at any rate. These bankers have such fancy titles these days!"

"Wow! That's great news! Bring her on the phone, I want to congratulate her."

"Oh, she's taking a nap, dear. Better not disturb her; she's been under some stress lately. I'll pass the message on when she wakes up. Which reminds me, Crystal says she'll be giving me extra allowance from now on, since, well, you know...since you're not working any more."

There it is. The acrimonious turn. Today it comes in the shape of a massive guilt trip.

"Mum, I'm really sorry that I'm not contributing. But it's only this year. I promise, when I get back to Singapore, and I start working..."

"Don't worry about it, Belle, I'm sure I'll manage just fine." She heaves a big sigh, and follows it with a pause. "It's funny how one's children can grow up to be complete opposites."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I say darkly.

"It *means* that the two of you are so different—she likes sports, you like to read, she's a banker, you're a teacher—well, you *were* a teacher—she's more grounded and you're so...what's the word I'm looking for...airy fairy."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "Mum, I'm done with breakfast now, and I have to go. Send Dad and Crystal my love, okay?"

"Where are you off to?"

"I need to pick up my laundry. Talk to you later, okay? Bye!"

After Mass, I take a downhill stroll to the base of Montmartre, wending past bright, colourful shops decorated and decked with a mind-boggling array of tourist knick-knacks—T-shirts, posters, football jerseys, Eiffel Tower statues, Arc de Triomphe trinkets, you get the picture. I find myself on Boulevard Clichy

and, unwilling to go home just yet, stop at a café to sit outside and enjoy the beautiful weather. Yes, I have finally understood the concept of “beautiful weather” and why people enjoy it so much. Back in Singapore, there is no “weather”. There’s only rain or heat—or, if you’re unlucky, both at the same time. Every. Single. Day. But here, the weather is so variable, so changeable; it can be so many different things. No wonder it’s a topic of conversation!

I order a double espresso and watch people and traffic whiz by on the wrong side of the road. Carefully, I perch my Jackie O sunglasses on my head like an onyx tiara. Perfect. I’m now a *Parisienne!* Just need to stop grinning like Charlie, Chucky or similarly deranged dolls.

I pick up my black leather tote bag and pull out my agenda. This is my must-do list, in order of priority:

1. Open bank account
2. Send emails to friends
3. Complete university matriculation process
4. Shop for autumn collection (can’t wait to have season- and weather-based wardrobe!)
5. Get foreign student card from the police HQ (!!)
6. Devise Annual Slogan

Ah yes. My Annual Slogan. I need a new one, given that the objectives of last year’s “Operation French-or-Fry” have already been achieved and said slogan has therefore lost all motivational value. Hmm... I must give it a lot of thought, as success or failure in life is entirely dependent on the quality of one’s slogans, as proven time and again by the Singapore government. My aims for this academic year are to:

- a) Become a beautiful Asian temptress
- b) Find a gorgeous boyfriend
- c) Be a successful, glamorous and perfectly bilingual Sorbonne graduate

It is obviously very hard to condense such complex and different ideas into a simple slogan, but with inspiration and a

bit of luck, I’m sure I can come up with something. I tap my pen against my forehead and think really hard. Let’s see...

I need a good female role model, someone who will best serve as this year’s moral compass.

Pretty Woman? (Who wouldn’t want to be Julia Roberts and get it on with Richard Gere? But only *Pretty Woman* Richard Gere, NOT *Chicago* Richard Gere, who is a different person altogether, and honestly quite yucky.) But Julia Roberts/Pretty Woman is a prostitute and I’m not sure the Pope would back me on this one. If the Church were to have a say, I would no doubt have to be Maria from *The Sound of Music*, but this also doesn’t work, primarily because I don’t have her maternal instincts and cannot break into song at will.

Bridget Jones? She’s a normal-looking girl who snags a gorgeous, successful boyfriend. And she’s cute and funny and lovable. But how does that tie in with being a successful, bilingual Sorbonne graduate?

A beautiful blonde lady in a brown leather jacket and boots walks past as I take another sip of my espresso. And then it hits me.

My new life-shaping movie should be *Legally Blonde!* My life should be guided by the moral of the movie—to work hard and beat the academic system on its terms, while not losing sight of the *real* reason why I am back in school, which is to find the love of my life. And the slogan...the slogan...

“*Legally Blanche!*” That’s it! Two words, yet so full of texture and hidden messages, i.e.:

- a) Spin on *Legally Blonde*—it even rhymes (sort of)!
- b) Instead of blonde, which has connotations of being stupid and flaky, my (metaphorical) hair colour will be *blanche*, signifying wisdom achieved from mugging for exams.
- c) The name Blanche is evocative of the Southern belle from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and yet I am a legit manifestation of this persona and will not overstep boundaries—in other words, I will be a temptress with high moral standards.

d) The slogan is in two languages—thus reflecting the ideal of perfect bilingualism.

I can't help smiling with complete satisfaction. With such a clearly articulated vision, I can now embark on a strategy of self-improvement. In order to become Legally *Blanche* (sexy, glamorous international woman of substance with hunky boyfriend in tow), I must get back on an exercise and diet regime, work my ass off at the Sorbonne and find aforesaid hunky boyfriend. Right now, all three seem unlikely, but that's the whole point of having a slogan, isn't it?

I think I'll go home now, change and go for a jog. Yes, a jog! I'm *super* motivated now. Either that, or it's the double espresso talking. "Monsieur, cheque please!"



It's the last week of September and I've been spending the last few days jumping through interminable administrative hoops and hurdles, like getting my matriculation done (school fees cost only €300!), finalising subjects, getting my library card, foreign student card etc. Whenever possible, Gula—the Uzbek girl—and I sought each other out, because we figured two heads were better than one when dealing with the university administration. I was better able to understand instructions and what was going on generally, but Gula, coming from an ex-communist country, was much more streetwise at manoeuvring through the bureaucratic morass. Even so, we were still no match for the French bureaucracy, which is older than even communism and built on a solid tradition of inaction and inertia.

Today I've decided to do something about my awful French—I'm going to look for a conversation exchange partner! It's a brilliant way for me to improve quickly. I put up an ad on the university's

noticeboard to search for a native French speaker, specifically a "male between the age of 25 and 35". You know, to optimise the chances of conversational success. Hee hee. In turn, he would get to practise his English with an "Anglophone Asian lady".

Another thing on my to-do list is to locate the university's swimming pool, because the Legally *Blanche* programme requires regular exercise. I really hope they have an Olympic-sized pool like the one at the National University of Singapore. I approach a group of *appartiteurs* (sort of like security guards and receptionists rolled into one) and ask where the pool is but they just look at me like I'm raving mad.

"There's no pool here," one of them says. He looks like he's been working for the university since the Middle Ages.

"*Oui, Monsieur*, I understand that," I say patiently and slowly, as if to a child. "It is not in this building. Can you tell me where it is? In another building perhaps?"

"I don't know about the other buildings. I just know this one."

"All right," I say through gritted teeth. "Do you know who I could ask?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Is there an office for student sports perhaps?"

"Corridor D, third floor, second door on the left."

I cross the building, make my way through a maze of corridors, and climb three floors. When I reach the office, I see that it's empty with the exception of a middle-aged lady sitting behind a huge desk.

"*Bonjour*," I say, approaching her desk.

"Please take a seat, and wait for my call," she says curtly. She continues to shuffle the papers on her desk, taking her time to arrange them into three neat stacks. And then, as if I'm not there, she picks up the phone and orders a pizza! "Yes, I would like to order a Sicilian Surprise please. One...with extra salami. Cerboutin. C-E-R-B... No, B as in *borne*... B, you know b!... Yes, Monsieur, B as in balls if you wish... O like...orange, U-T for tango, I, and N for ninja. And one diet Coke. Yes, the usual

address. And please don't be late like the last time. Yes...thank you...goodbye." She then places the receiver down with a gentle click, looks up and greets me as if I've just walked in.

"*Madame, bonjour!*" she says with a smile as bright as it is fake.

It feels ridiculous but I play along, "*Bonjour*. I would like to know where I could find the varsity swimming pool please."

"Sorry this is the office for student associations, not sports clubs."

Super. "Do you know where the office for sports clubs is?"

"No, you'll have to ask the *appariteurs* for that," she replies.

If I had been fresh off the boat from Singapore, I would have strangled her or broken down in tears or both, but after two weeks here, I am beginning to learn that French bureaucratic stonewalling is a fact of life. I must keep my cool. Stay Zen. The idea is to go with the flow.

"Well, since I am here, can I find out which student associations I can join?"

"Of course. Here is the list of associations. For more information, you can call them up and ask for details."

I have an idea. "Can we check the university website for information?" I ask, giving a meaningful glance at her desktop.

"You'll have to ask the *appariteurs* for the library, where you can get an Internet connection," she says, the plastic smile fixed firmly on her face.

So I rush to the library, spend 20 minutes trying to configure the network connection on my laptop, and check the university website (no mention of sports facilities, but found the address for the sports clubs, yes!). Then I race up the road to the Panthéon building, get lost, ask for directions and finally arrive at the office. It's closed for lunch. Back at 2.30pm!

In frustration, I take out the list of student associations the woman gave me, hoping to find someone who can tell me where the pool is, or, as it's beginning to dawn on me, if there's one in the first place.

- The Sorbonne Communist Party (no)
- The Young Socialists (no)

- The Guitar Club (no)
- The Chess Club (eek)
- The Student Proletariat Revolutionary Committee (scary)
- The Anti-globalisation League (?)
- Anarchists Disunited (???)

The rest of the list is made up of various student unions (maybe) and so I call one of the numbers listed.

A gruff-sounding voice picks up on the other end. "*Allo*, National Federation of Student Unions."

"Hello? I'm a student at the Sorbonne and I was just wondering if you know where the varsity pool is?"

"Are you a member of the Union?" the voice asks.

"No, I'm not. I just want to go to the pool."

"There's no varsity pool here," he says laughing, and then as an afterthought, "Would you like one?"

The question catches me by surprise but I reflexively say yes, of course I'd like one.

"Okay then. Join our union and we'll add that to the list of demands for our next mobilisation. You can lead a pool sub-committee. Where should I send the form?"

I panic—I just want to go swimming, not instigate civil unrest! "No, no, don't send the form. It's okay. You know what, I don't think I need a varsity pool after all. But thanks for offering. *Au revoir!*"

Oh God. Does this mean I have to swim in public pools?



We all had to submit our thesis topics last week, and as I was at a total loss for ideas, I decided to do something relating to international organisations. I informed M. Blois of this, and he has arranged for me to meet with my research supervisor—a

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PHOTO BY: CHUN PANG

About the Author

Imran Hashim fell in love with France a little late in life (in his teens) but made up for it by studying French with a vengeance at the National University of Singapore, and then winning a French Government Scholarship for his postgraduate studies at the Sorbonne and Sciences Po Paris. Apart from providing the inspiration for his first novel, his time in Paris prepared him for jobs with an international focus, and he is currently working for a British university.



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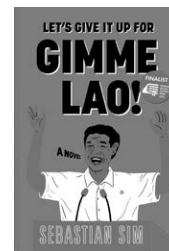
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