

New Years Eve in Québec City, "la Capitale Nationale"

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Katah and I have started sledding. There is a nice little lighted city hill right near here, about two blocks away. Started innocently enough, on crazy carpets. Lina comes over and we go together; we have three crazy carpets. Then we made a little plan to slide for New Year's, up on Mt. Royal, lake of the castors, then the plan got consumed by a bigger idea and in the end we drove up to Quebec city, arriving on the 30th, after dark, for an evening of feasting and getting oriented.



Staying up on the hill, "up-town". Daisy street, in a souped up little old 1920s blue-collar worker's row house. Brick and hard wood... no creaks, no squeaks, warm, quiet... Nice location, on the hill looking out over the sprawling modern city, called "down-town". The "Capitale Nationale", Québec City, snowy metropolis of French Canada.

We were invited by Isabelle, who is Lina's hiking companion, especially from their recent Corsica trip; that was, supposedly, the theme of the dinner, Isabelle had arranged. Boar and Caribou, baked or roasted in their own juices, served with baguette and fresh green vegetables, followed by a Corsican cheese smothered in rosemary, and a Corsican vin rouge. Nice party, Isabelle's friend Rene came over, everyone spoke French.

In the morning a warm up hike, on the 31st, the Valle Jaques Cartier, just north of Quebec city, till about 2, just walking through the snow following the river... till just at dusk, when we returned in the glowing evening light.

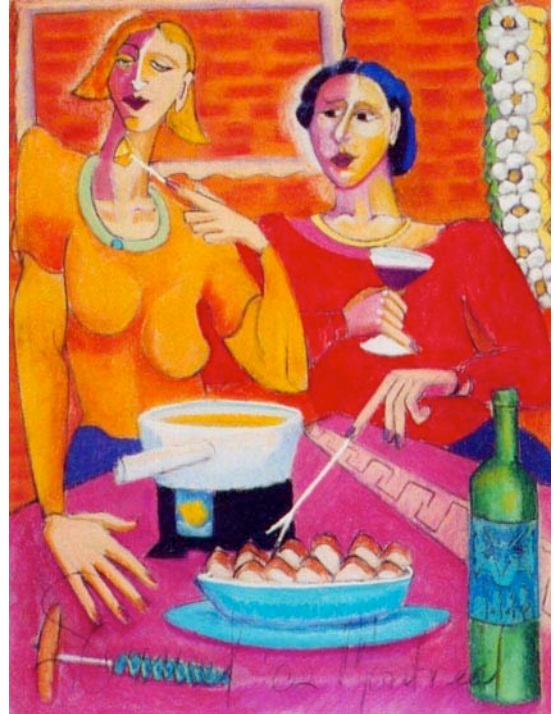
Shopping in the chic charcuteries, and boulangeries, in the rustic section of boutiques and parking problems. The stores were crowded, everyone making last minute preparations to celebrate the occasion. Rich and exotic, select from a thousand different wines. Cheeses, spices, chocolates, teas and coffees: amazing, really.

We napped for a couple of hours. About seven PM, three hours after dark, we started to seriously celebrate the New Year. We had shopped carefully on the way back from the hike and we were ready to make an exquisite meal. So exquisite, I came to feel, my nose was tickled to the realization, that we were making a ritual.

Starting with home made sushi with tuna and petonque, wasabi and ginger, wrapped in roasted seaweed, decorated with red caviar and fenouille, accompanied by a cold Alsace pinot gris, Trimbach '99, sweet and fruity. We were dancing pretty intensely to the CD player on the highly waxed hardwood, floor. St. Germain's *Album Tourist*... good sound system, sound so dense you could lean into it.

Katah prepared the fondue. Dancing all the time. Dancing till we could see. It is New Year's eve and we are accepting our roles, celebrants of the last and the next year, we are at the junction, 2001/2002. We accept and honor our role with ritual portions. There is a devotional feeling about the party, a tranced feeling about it, the continual dancing and the exquisite food, with the delicious wines. Lina brought a bottle of "Pan", pagan wines, from Montepulciano d Abruzzo `97, that was rich and dark and gripping.

Perfect compliment to the dry, sharp, taste of the fondue.



The fondue was made with two hard cheeses, *Comte Forte Brusse* and *Vigneron*, melted in white wine, the fondue pan rubbed first with garlic. We dipped baguette and fresh vegetables, broccoli and green peppers and mushrooms, into the hot melted cheese. The pot sat in the middle of the table with a small fire under it to keep the steaming contents warm..

As we went back to the dance floor we even smoked a bit of rope. The kind that comes in a big plastic bag full of sticks and twigs, where you have to sort out the fragments of leaf; the papers are in there loose. The reefer is as big around as your finger and burns hot and puts out a screen of smoke that scents the whole house immediately. A lot like taking the sage bundle and cleansing the spirit, smoking it, smudging it! Dancing to the Montréal group Ramasutra.

At eleven, Isabelle`s friend, Andre, came over to join us. We were five... We suited up. Crazy Carpets under our arms: mere slips of plastic, plastic sheets about 16 inches wide and three feet long with two hand holes on the leading edge. Out into the night, headed for the Plains of Abraham. The full moon had been the night before, but it was still clear and cold, a little below freezing, with plenty of moonlight. The deep black, endless universe and the multitude of stars totally visible.. Our steamy breath hung in the still air and we walked through it. We were the only people out; our voices carried, distinct, musical... the women's laughter and French, with a steady stream of English for ballast. It was just a matter of crossing over the crest of the hill, walking toward the river, heading south, chatting and laughing, hand in hand..

Andre was telling how the French had lost control of Québec... The English ships had ridden at anchor for so long, right in sight out on the river, just under the "unassailable palisades", it seemed that the French garrison forgot what they were doing there. One night the British troopers climbed the escarpments and fell into shooting formation right here on the Plains of Abraham. The heart of the province. In the morning the French were so surprised to see the red coats that the English fired only one round to win their surrender...

This story still made Katah angry, the loss of the rich farm land, centuries of being dominated by the English, the diaspora, the French being driven out of Acadia... I could hear it all in her voice as she acknowledged there was some truth to Andre's account.

We could see an 18th century prison through the trees, where the Quebecois patriots and the country militia men spent many a winter. Prisoners of the English empire. The "Prison Museum", an art museum in an old prison. I guess it is a good idea, liberating the space? It sounds a little to oxymoronic to me, like the karma of the original intent could never be overcome. It features very ominous lighting, which accents the defensiveness of the architecture, the trap and snare and violence of it. The lights stream down the walls; the subtext still says barred windows, no freedom, no escape.

Once we have put the cells and great stone walls behind us we are standing at the crest of the hill over looking a ten acre open field that goes down to the black band of the St. Lawrence river, maybe half a mile wide here.

There are two snow fences, one perpendicular to the fall line across the bottom and one across the top, the upper fence supporting the little sign that says "No Sledding".

Totally great spot. With a refinery, looking like a space ship on the other shore. Andre recalls that when Spielberg was making ET the designers asked him, "What do you want the space ship to look like?" He replied, "A refinery at night." Smoke rising from the cracking facilities, white against the black sky. Lights, halogen, quartz, white, yellow, street lights, safety lights on all the tubes and junctions, crossings and intersections, the maze of pipes and tanks. Lights, red, flashing, to warn airplanes. Yellow lights and white lights. One of the steel chimneys is flaring, flaming off some unredeemable volatile... the whole complex seems to be floating in the distance...

Just below, at our feet, virtually, on the broad black band of the river, two oil tankers, standing off, in the current, waiting to be loaded.

A great open slope, quite steep with a tree line along the east edge, and some sort of space tower over the trees. A very primitive looking structure, ultra simple, round column, color and texture of mud, with a horizontal ring of metal and glass windows one hundred feet off the ground, like a control tower... a watch-post for prison guards? Above, it shapes into a turret and is topped by communication towers and red warning lights. Echoing the prison motif, ominous, monolithic, but in fact, it is a rotating restaurant at the Hotel Concord.

Very quiet night. The wash of moonlight touches everything; even the cold is at rest. The shadows, snuggled below the maple trees, are very dark.

Deep stillness, clear crisp air.

It takes no time to find the route that people have been using. There was no one on the slope. We could see the sled tracks along the edge near the trees, as far as possible from the buildings. Right at the end of the snow fence, sledding barrier, people had packed out a trail. The snow was sled packed, slippery as could be, with a very light dusting of powder over the top.



Andre started, first one down, with a whoop, throwing himself on his belly on the crazy carpet. Shooting into the shadow along the tree line. A white cloud, roiling up and embracing the space where he had been a second before.

We could see the white ice crystal cloud with his boots sticking out... We were all rushing down the hill, snow flying, making icy crystalline clouds that flew along with us. Rolling and laughing and shouting, very little control over the carpets; the fall line determines the descent...

The next slider, black, black against the snowy hill, rushes at you; we have not learned how to control the sleds: it seems they go where you think... So seeing someone walking on the slope you are sure to hurtle right at them,

and the climber with his crazy carpet under his arm waits till the last second and jumps out of the way.

There were five of us. Two, Lina and Isabelle, started doing dance routines at the top of the hill; when the sliders would come up the two would say, "How are they celebrating New Year's in Russia?" Waiting for you to reply, "I don't know", Lina and Isabelle would do Russian, Cossack dancing, making themselves horizontal, putting their palms on the ground behind themselves. Dancing in unison throwing their feet in the air with great shouts of pleasure... "How are they celebrating New Years in Greece?" and they would do Greek dancing, their arms on each other's shoulders, their feet crossing in back and forming Greek pictograph patterns. Finally they even did the Can Can!

It is midnight and we all wish each other a happy Yew Year with hugging in our big winter clothes, clapping our mittens, and kissing through our scarves and collars. Hats pulled down around our ears. Lips smacking cheek to cheek. We have made it through 2001 and we are ready to crazy carpet into 2002.

Jump on the plastic carpet, the magic carpets, and hurtle head first through the snow on a slope as steep as the cone of Mt. Orizaba.. One at a time, two at a time, hooked together, apart, on our bellies, on our bottoms, laughing and rolling, picking each other up. Put the carpet on the ground right at the brink of the hill. Kneel down, one knee in the snow on each side, take the handles in your gloves, look where you want to go, and cast yourself forward chest and belly to the ground feet high in the air..Whoosh..Yippee!!! zoom...

There is a fantastic sculpture behind the prison museum, on the hill over the river and the refinery... I wonder how it got there? It is the second well placed, disturbing, sculpture I have seen here in Quebec. It is like art has a function here...

Black Steel, heavily welded, with two gaping dragon mouths, each three feet long, like long parallel slits in a narrow cone, an upper and a lower jaw, facing in opposite directions like rotors; an explosion of ammunition boxes, abstract, where the eyes might be, and a black, steel skirt of cannon fire. It fit the distant refinery right between its teeth...

Shades of helicopters, "Black Hawk" gun ships, Tora Bora... Da Nang to Tora Bora....

After an hour the dark buildings start to speak to us... first time we do not understand, but then again... *"Madames et monsieurs... it is forbidden to glissade in this zone, cet zone est interdit pour la glissade, if we have to come out there we will give you a fine"*... Talking buildings, not a person, not a light in sight. Large dark eminences...

So we packed it in. Walked back across the fields of Abraham. under the starry Orion of 2002. Back to Isabelle's warm house. Back to a bottle of Chevre Noir, the most delicious bottle of the evening. Enjoyed with a salad of baby greens, red onion, radichio, arugula, chicory, lettuces and mango...plus little pieces of *pan forte*...

And we danced till we dropped...

Happy New Year to you too...

From Montréal....Sam and Katah