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Lessons in French

Written by Hilary Reyl

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HILARY REYL

Lessons *in* French

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For Charles, mon grand amour

one

They say I have no accent and that this is a gift. Sometimes, people can detect a lilt in my voice, which makes them wonder which rural part of France I come from, or maybe which Scandinavian country. But no one can hear that I'm American. And yet, because I am not French, I show almost no signs of belonging to any group or class. In Paris, I am virtually transparent. A gift, perhaps. *Un don,* so to speak, *voilà.* But, when you feel invisible, there is no end to the trouble you can get into.

My trouble began in 1989, on a wet September morning at Charles de Gaulle Airport, when I decided to splurge on a taxi into town. The worn smells of leather and tobacco were deeply reassuring, the precise blend of odors I craved at the edge of the unknown.

But I probably shouldn't have taken that taxi. Mom claimed that you had a much higher chance of dying on the way to or from the airport than you did on the plane. However, you had more say about how you traveled on the ground. You could go by car, bus or subway. You could slow down, look both ways, watch your back. On the ground, you could take responsibility. In the air, worry was nothing but a production.

I had just graduated from college, and was trying to ignore most of what Mom said, but I was secretly proud of her, pretending to be as callous as she would have been to any signs of fear in myself as my plane flew to Paris.

The driver asked me where I was returning from. Where had I been on my *vacances*?

I told him I hadn't been on vacation anywhere. I had been a waitress in New Haven all summer. That was a town on the East Coast, near New York.

Ah, New York!

But I was returning to Paris for the first time in ten years. Though I wasn't French, my grandfather was, and I lived here once, for two years, with cousins, in the Nineteenth Arrondissement.

He laughed. Today, he wasn't driving me to the Nineteenth but to the Sixth. A much more chic *quartier*. More central. Mademoiselle was moving up in the world!

We glided through the industrial ring around the city. We had just permeated its first layer when the taxi was rear-ended at a stoplight. There was a shock, a screech, swearing.

I felt so vindicated for Mom that I was strangely overjoyed by this accident, proof-positive of her theories of relative danger. I sidelined the fact that she would have told me to take the Métro because it was cheaper, and safer. I had wanted a driver to be my own personal shepherd into my new life.

This was my moment in the sun. So what if it was drizzling? Experience was going to transform all.

The driver punched the steering wheel—"*Merde*!"—as I flew into his headrest.

"*Ça va*?" he asked, rubbing his own forehead. "Are you hurt?"

No, no, I was not hurt, and I would wait uncomplainingly on the sidewalk of this outer arrondissement for him to exchange the necessary information with the woman who had hit us.

We were by a news kiosk. I had forgotten that the news kiosks here were green and suppository-shaped, that the newsprint was denser than ours, that there were Chupa Chups lollipops and Hollywood gum for sale, a magazine called Figaro Madame, headlines about a pop star named Johnny Hallyday, erotic ads for coffee and chocolate, small posters for chamber music concerts in Ste-Chapelle, dog shit. It was all coming back.

Looking hard at the familiar candies and magazine covers, I saw their colors and meanings bleed into lines and shapes. I pulled a sketchbook and pencil from my bag, keeping half an ear to the words between my driver and the offending woman. He wrote down her details. She lit a cigarette.

Because I sensed the conversation wrapping up, I did not put pencil to paper. There was too much to draw in a few moments, and I hated resorting to quick symbols and tricks. I was uncannily good at reproducing what I saw, but only in the fulness of time. If I couldn't do it right, I would rather simply stare. I slipped my sketchbook away.

The drizzle was lightening into the gray gauze I recalled well but hadn't thought of in years.

In Germany, the Berlin Wall was about to come down. A photo on the front page of *Le Monde* showed a rock band playing a concert in front of big bright graffiti on the West Berlin side. I looked into the crowd that filled out the *Le Monde* photo. People were dancing ecstatically, sensing the coming demolition, except for the photographers, who were still, their flashes going off.

I scanned the photo for my new boss, Lydia Schell, the woman I had come here to work for. She was a photographer, a famous one. Mom had not heard of her, but once I was able to prove her credentials, Mom was impressed that I would have the opportunity to be the Paris impresario to someone with such a name. "Impresario" was Mom's term. When I had interviewed with her in her Manhattan town house a few weeks ago, Lydia had called me her assistant.

Now she was in Germany capturing the momentous happenings. There was a chance, wasn't there, that she was in that crowd, peeking through her lens at me in welcome?

"You made it," she would say, if only I could spot her. *"Bienvenue!"*

two

My dented taxi stopped on a beautiful street that flowed toward the Luxembourg Gardens, stonework giving way to rich green. This was a new angle on Paris for me. *Le Sixième.* Even the cigarette smoke was elegant here, twirling above well-groomed bodies in a velvet calligraphy quite foreign to the noxious haze of my youthful memory. There was no confusing this cigarette smoke with car exhaust just as there was no confusing the clatter of high heels on this pavement with the street sounds outside my cousins' subsidized building. What had those sounds been again? I couldn't remember. They were muffled now by the luxurious revving of a Citroën's engine, by the calm rustle of nearby leaves, by the voluptuous exhale of an impossibly petite woman in two-toned heels, which even I knew were Chanel, her shoulder pads broad enough to soften any blow.

The taxi was gone. I was outside No. 60 with my suitcase, forgetting the exorbitant fare as I looked down my new street, repeating the building code, 67FS, which I would have to punch in order to open the door to the interior courtyard, "a hidden gem," according to Lydia, "although my husband Clarence likes to complain that it's dark and depressing." As I was preparing to punch the keys that would work this magical door, it opened by itself.

"Ah, c'est mademoiselle Katherine?"

"Madame Fidelio, je vous reconnais de votre photo!" It was true. I recognized her overhanging brow from a photograph of Lydia's.

Her plumpness did nothing to soften her sculptural face. I knew that skull, those imposing eyebrows. She was an intimate, the Portuguese concierge who also helped with Lydia's housework. *"C'est vous, non?"*

"Oui, c'est moi. Enchantée, Mademoiselle." She gave a short laugh, overshadowed and outlasted by the suspicion in her eyes. Was I going to be a slut like so many of Madame's other assistants? Was that what she was looking to know from my brown ponytail, pale pink lip gloss, jeans, leg warmers, t-shirt frayed and ripped to reveal one shoulder?

I wanted to tell her that she had nothing to worry about. I was a serious young woman who could not afford to be careless. I needed this job. I still wasn't quite sure what it entailed, but whatever Lydia's "little bit of everything" was, it would become my mission because Lydia was my first step into a real future. I had no intention of being a disaster, of dragging strange men up to my maid's room or coming to work hungover. This wasn't throwaway time for me like it had been for the other, more privileged girls. This time was real, Madame Fidelio.

"You have no accent." Her tone hovered between mistrust and admiration.

"I lived in Paris when I was younger. I had cousins here, cousins of my father's. My grandfather came from France to America but his brother stayed here, and his children were my dad's favorite relatives. His only relatives really. I stayed with them for two years."

"They will be happy to see you again, no?"

"They have retired and moved away. They were teachers in Paris, because they were sent here by the school system, but they always knew they would go home, to Orléans. So, I'll have to take the train to visit them sometime."

"That is a good thing, to be attached to your roots. My husband and I, we return to our family in Portugal every August."

Watching Madame Fidelio's slow understanding nod as she spoke, I was struck by the force of my cousins' nostalgia. As a kid, I never thought much about the fact that Solange and Jacques were

always scrimping and saving to build a small retirement house in a development outside their native town despite the fact of forty working years in Paris. It was simply the state of things. But it now struck me as incredible to have so concrete a vision of the future guiding your every youthful move, to know you will go home again, to live your life in a loop.

I thought Madame Fidelio might begin to tell me more about herself, perhaps her own plan to return home someday for good, but instead she said that I was prettier than the last girl and repeated that my French was *impressionnant*.

Relief sunk in. Along with gratitude to my cousins for their patient teaching. When Lydia arrived, she would learn from her faithful concierge that I had told the truth about my fluency back in New York, and our first bond of trust would be forged.

But, even more striking was the fact that I had impressed the impressive Madame Fidelio. I must, in fact, be someone.

She looked at me, smiled.

I read my substance in her eyes.

"I do not know if the young *monsieur* is awake yet," she said. "Perhaps we should not ring the doorbell. I have a key to the apartment, of course. *Allons.*"

It took me a few seconds, as we walked across the interior courtyard toward a staircase at the back, to mentally match "young *monsieur"* to Olivier, boyfriend of Lydia's daughter, Portia, who was a couple of years younger than I. Olivier was going to show me around the apartment before he left later today for the final leg of his European trip. Madame Fidelio's hushed and reverential tone suggested a prince.

"Does he like to sleep in?" Although I had quite forgotten his existence until now, my curiosity was suddenly acute.

"He is often pale. He has many *soucis,* I think. But he is *charmant."*

"Ah, bon." What kind of *soucis?* What troubles?

I could see why Lydia had said the courtyard was precious. It was cobblestoned and planted with manicured trees in ornate pots,

with dignified doors and tall windows rising all around. The building's inner walls formed a plush lining to this jewel box, known only to its owners and their secret guests. I felt a thrill of initiation. I also saw Clarence's point. There was almost no sunlight. It was indeed a little dark and depressing.

The apartment was on the ground floor. As Madame Fidelio turned her key, I recognized the firm, if vaguely tender, expression from the final plate in Lydia's latest book, *Parisians.* It was a book of portraits that began with the famous literary critic Jacques Derrida, in a bathrobe, in front of a bowl of coffee at the white plastic table in his suburban garden, and ended with this Portuguese concierge. The book had been criticized. They said Lydia Schell had lost her edge. *Parisians* was a mixture of Who's who and *noblesse oblige*. But it had sold better than anything else she had done.

We came into an entry hall half-painted a color I could only call eggplant. The painting work must have stopped suddenly because the last brush-stroke of purple dripped down the creamy primer.

Madame Fidelio clucked at the unfinished walls. *"Pauvre Madame Lydia,"* she said cryptically. Then she signaled me to follow her down a long paneled hallway with many doors, some closed, some ajar enough to give me clues as I passed, a swatch of fabric, the pattern of a rug, the flicker of a mirror.

Only one door was fully opened. I saw an unmade twin bed with a pale blue ruffle in the same fabric as the drapes. I could not tell whether there were flowers or little figures on the fabric, but something was going on, something delicate and complicated. There was a dressing table strewn with bottles and tiny baskets.

"*C'est la chambre de la jolie petite*."

La jolie petite must be Portia. I thought of the fine-boned blond girl in the red leather frame back in the dining room clutter of the Greenwich Village house. As I wondered how Madame Fidelio might describe me, I tried to tread lightly down the hallway, a girl accustomed to bed ruffles that matched her drapes. A girl with a dressing table perhaps.

After a time, the hallway forked. That door down to the right,

said Madame Fidelio, was Monsieur Clarence's study. We veered left into the kitchen, which, on first glance, was less substantial than Lydia's kitchen in New York. The appliances here were white, not stainless, and they appeared half-sized.

On the wall was a framed series of Lydia's magazine covers. There was a *Rolling Stone* cover of Jim Morrison and one of Yoko Ono crying, holding a single wildflower in Central Park. There was a *Time* cover of Nelson Mandela. There was a *Life* cover that was probably the March on Washington. Martin Luther King was moving in a sea of signs. "Voting Rights Now!" "End Segregated Rules in Public Schools!" The March on Washington took place in 1963. That would make Lydia about my age when she took this photo. I wondered if she had felt young.

"Ah, monsieur!" Madame Fidelio smiled appreciatively, a woman who approved of men.

Young Monsieur was sitting at the kitchen table. He was tousled, and there was a fresh warmth to him, a waft of the morning bread from the *boulangeries* I could remember from my childhood.

He must have just emerged from that soft rustled bed I had glimpsed from the hallway, Portia's bed. Without being able to look straight at him, I knew he was the most attractive person I'd ever seen. He was reedy and lithe. His hair tumbled like light over features of brushed elegance, light brown eyes, cheekbones curved and quick as the paws of a cat.

"Bonjour, Madame Fidelio." He had an American accent.

There was a flicker of annoyance in his face, surely at the invasion of his last private moments in the apartment, but the flicker disappeared as his gaze lit on me, and in the lifting of Monsieur's irritation I felt myself uplifted, blessed, sun-kissed.

"You must be Kate. I'm Olivier."

"Sorry to bother you so early." It was just before ten o'clock. "Lydia says you're leaving for Italy today. You probably have a lot to do."

"Tomorrow, actually." He smiled. "I don't fly to Venice until tomorrow morning. And I'll be back in a couple of weeks to pick up most of my stuff before I head out for good. So, I'm mellow." He

flung a wave of brown curls out of his eyes and looked at me again. Then he rose and put the kettle on. "Tea? Madame Fidelio? Kate?"

Madame Fidelio said she would leave us. Here was my key to the main apartment. Here was the key to the maid's room on the sixth floor where I would live. But not the sixth floor on this staircase. The *escalier de service.* Monsieur would show Mademoiselle, please.

"Pas de problème, Madame Fidelio," he said.

"Merci beaucoup, Madame!" I added. *"Vous êtes gentille de vous occuper de moi."*

"Bonne journée, mes petits."

The three of us smiled indulgently at one another. Again, I felt a certain pride in sensing I had made a favorable first impression on regal Madame Fidelio. I had passed through my first gate.

"How do you like your tea?" Olivier asked once she had gone.

"I like milk, if there is any."

He took a carton from the small refrigerator.

My cousins' refrigerator had been an even tinier affair, drawerless, without a working light. But I had bright memories of the food packages inside, and they were revived in a flurry by the box in Olivier's slender hand. It was *longue conservation* milk, the kind everyone here drank. It could sit in that box for months until you snipped one of the corners and began to pour. It had a chemical smell that used to make me nauseated. I hated it. I had never told Mom because she had had more important things on her mind at the time, but the milk here was terrible.

"I got some honey at the farmers' market on Boulevard Raspail. Would you like some in your tea?"

I had forgotten I liked honey but was suddenly longing for it.

"Sure. Honey would be great. I've never been to the market on Raspail. Is it wonderful? I haven't been to Paris in over ten years."

"Where did you get that accent? You sounded totally native talking to Madame Fidelio just now."

I fell back on well-rehearsed lines. "I think the timing of when I learned was perfect. I was here between the ages of nine and eleven,

young enough to get the accent and old enough to intellectualize the language."

"No, you must be gifted. I've spent years here on and off and my mother's French and I sound awful."

"I doubt that."

He laughed gently. "Spend some time with me then."

I felt brave enough to glance into his eyes.

"So you're fresh off the plane," he said. He made my freshness sound like the quality of a flower or an apple. "Lydia says you're a painter. Is there anything you want to see today, any art, anything in particular in Paris?"

"She told me you'd only have a few hours before you caught your plane and you'd barely have time to show me the alarm and the washing machine and such."

She told me you were charming.

"But I don't leave until tomorrow, remember? I love Lydia, but she has a lot on her mind. We can't expect her to remember other people's schedules. I have a whole day. I thought maybe I'd just walk around. I have to pick something up in the Sixteenth. Figured I'd go to the Marmottan. You know, where all the Monet waterlilies are? I haven't been there this trip. I know it's not very cool or contemporary, but I'm a nostalgic person." He sighed. "I'm about to start a job in New York. Investment banking. I doubt I'll have time to *flâner* in the foreseeable future. So I'm open. What do *you* want to do?"

"Can we get a croissant?"

three

At the *pâtisserie* on the corner, Olivier asked what I would like.

A plain croissant, please.

He bought it for me, and ordered a pain au chocolat and a pain aux raisins for himself.

We wandered over into the Seventh Arrondissement. On the rue du Bac, we passed the luxurious grocery store Hédiard, and I smiled inside because Hédiard had been a joke in my cousins' house. When Étienne and Jacques would refuse second helpings of Solange's food, she would say, "If this isn't good enough for you, *changez de restaurant! Allez chez Hédiard!*"

I wondered now if Solange knew that Hédiard wasn't a restaurant, but a famous store with Art Nouveau windows framing pyramids of fruit and pastries against a luscious depth of cheeses and exotic teas in red-lacquered drawers. But what caught my eye, as we floated by, was a silver tray of croissants à la crème de marron. I loved chestnuts, and imagined chestnut cream to be something otherworldly. These chestnut croissants, with their dusting of powdered sugar, struck me as the most delicious things I could possibly eat, but I wasn't sad that I didn't have one at this moment. I still had half of the plain croissant that Olivier had bought for me, and I knew I could wander to Hédiard on my own anytime from now on. I lived nearby.

My lack of covetousness toward today's uneaten treasure was so marked that I wondered if I hadn't become a new person. So often I was defined by what I could not have.

Olivier veered away from me into Hédiard. I moved to follow him, but he told me to give him a second. When he reappeared, it was with two of the chestnut croissants. "Second breakfast." He winked.

When we reached the Seine, I gazed across to the Grande Roue, the giant Ferris wheel that comes to the Tuilleries a couple of times a year.

He saw me staring. "You'd like to ride in it too, wouldn't you? It's a great way to get the lay of the land if you haven't been to Paris for a while. Let's go."

We had a compartment to ourselves. Our knees grazed in the metal seat. Whenever the wheel stopped, we rocked into each other, pretending not to notice, talking too much.

After the ride, we were altered and unsteady. We walked quietly along the Right Bank all the way to the Sixteenth, where we picked up a small paper bag that he said was for Lydia.

"I get along with her pretty well," he ventured. "But she's complicated. And the family is complicated. You're in for some interesting times. I hope you've been taking your vitamins."

I wanted more information about Lydia and her mysterious family, but I also didn't want to be reminded that this boy across this café table from me sipping Belgian beer, drawing glances from all around, belonged to them.

I reminded him that he had mentioned the Marmottan museum with the Monets.

"Are you sure you want to go?" he asked.

"I would love to."

"That didn't sound entirely convincing." He looked at me with an attention I had rarely felt. "Are you being polite?"

"No, no, I'm strange about the Impressionists, the style. I don't have my own style yet, so I get a bit wary, and impressed, so to speak." I giggled lamely. "But I'd like to go. I'd like to look at the actual paintings. I've seen so many reproductions."

"You can't not have a style."

"Think about mirrors. No style, right?"

"You're funny," he smiled, making my funniness into an appreciable quality, a style of its own.

He told me his mother used to take him to the Marmottan on trips to Paris when he was a boy. It was her favorite museum because it was small and perfect, a *bijou*. He always made at least one pilgrimage when he was in town. "She loves the place and the paintings, and it's hard for her to travel these days. Her circumstances aren't what they used to be. Hopefully, I can start bringing her back once I'm working and I can afford it. Anyway, her favorite thing about this museum is the series of footbridges over the lily pads. I think you'll see why."

As we walked uphill to the end of the rue de Passy and through a dainty park, Olivier's eyes gleamed with what I took to be memory.

"What are *your* parents like?" he asked.

"Well, my dad died when I was eleven. While I was living in Paris actually. The whole time he was dying of cancer, he kept writing me letters about how happy he was that I got to be here, living with his cousin Jacques whom he adored, and learning French. He never really got fluent in French. His own dad didn't speak it to him—I guess he wanted him to fit in in America—and Dad had this idea that my learning the langauge would somehow make my life complete."

"You must miss him."

"I think about him all the time, try to guess what he would say if he could see me, especially here."

"I'm sorry," he said.

I shook my head. "It's okay."

"So, did your mom bring you up? I mean, after?"

"Basically. I guess you could say my mom is wonderful. I mean, she was supposed to have another kind of life. My dad was an up-and-coming movie director when she married him. She probably thought she was going to have fun, but ended up taking care of him when he got sick and then working hard as a secretary, an executive secretary in a law firm, but still a secretary, when she could

have done something truly interesting with her life. She's slaved all these years to send me to good schools and she's proud of me. It's been just the two of us since I came home from France. She lets me do these things that make her seem almost liberal, like coming to Paris to work for Lydia, but it's because she believes in some form of well-roundedness to prepare you for life. Actually, she's obsessed with me becoming a corporate lawyer because what she wants for me more than anything is security, and she knows that you can't rely on anyone but yourself for that. And I feel terrible about not wanting to be a lawyer. But I really don't. I don't think that way at all. Logically, I mean. I don't think logically. It would be torture."

I was suddenly embarrassed. Had I been talking this whole time? Did I seem disloyal to Mom? Was I?

"You know, Kate, I've only just met you, but you appear to me to be many things at once. So, you may not have the luxury of diving into your dreams right away. Almost no one does. I've thought about this a lot. Not everyone can do everything in the ideal order. That's what children of privilege don't have to face."

I imagined that he too dreamed of the freedoms of privilege and I felt intensely jealous of Portia, but only for a second because the next thing he said was, "They get so hedonistic sometimes, it makes them soft. Portia and Joshua have their good points, but they are incredibly spoiled. They just don't get it like we do."

At the mention of Joshua, I was startled into recalling that Portia had a problematic younger brother. I felt the onrush of all I had yet to know.

We stood in a room full of different colored impressions of the footbridge in Monet's Japanese garden at Giverny. Olivier explained that his mother had told him that it was impossible to know that this was a bridge from looking at only one of the paintings by itself. You needed the series of views superimposed in your head for the true image to take shape.

"I see what she means," I said. "It's a beautiful trick. Pretend

you don't know what they are supposed to be and walk around until the bridge comes out at you."

These paintings were gorgeous, but they made me uncomfortable. Even though they had become classics, they took an intimidating leap of faith, painting the light instead of the contours of the thing itself, letting the subject slowly emerge on a magical surface. I was convinced I could never do such a thing. I was too literal. I loved the Monets, but I didn't entirely trust them.

In a nearby tearoom, over the tiniest and most expensive of tomato tarts, which Oliver treated me to, he finally told me what was in the bag he had just gotten for Lydia. "Papaya extract pills, probably mixed with speed. She gets them from a diet guru up here."

"Why are *you* picking them up?"

"She likes to involve people she feels close to in her fetching and carrying. It's an emotional thing. She'd never ask Clarence because she would feel too judged, but I'm sure she'll want you to do it. She starts by asking you to pick something up somewhere without telling you what it is. But she always ends up blurting it out sooner or later. She can't not confess eventually, but she controls her timing."

"Maybe that's what makes her such a great artist."

"Yeah, that's what you have to remember when you're tempted to make fun of her for wanting to funnel baguettes and cheese all day, then sending you out for these damn pills. She's amazing at what she does."

We made our way back across the Seine and over to the Sixth with a detour through the Rodin Sculpture Garden, where we sat on a bench and watched children feed ducks in the shadow of Balzac. How lucky to grow up here, we agreed.

I asked him about the signet ring on his finger.

It was a *chevalière* with the coat of arms from his mother's side of the family. He wore it for her.

"Is that castle on there your long-lost château somewhere deep in the Dordogne?"

"The Loire, actually." He laughed. "But you're right, it's long-gone. The land is gone too. They sold it when my mother was a child. The only piece of it left is the 'de' in her name. It's my middle name. I'm Olivier de Branche Craft."

Suddenly, I felt light among the statues in this venerable garden. Amid all these voluptuous stones straining toward life, just short of breathing, here I was so very alive without even trying. The simple stupid joy of it was overwhelming.

I stole a glance at Olivier. I felt my throat catch. I had to say something to make sure that I could still speak.

"Olivier *de* Branche," I said, with emphasis on the particle, and I reached to touch the golden ring. "Maybe you'll be able to rebuild the château for your mother one day."

"You're sweet, but I'd settle for a *pied-à-terre* in the Sixth."

I pulled my hand into my lap.

Back at the apartment, we sat in the half-painted living room and drank Lydia's white wine infused with a crème de pêche. She had gotten Olivier hooked on her peach Kirs while they were here together last month. Olivier had been traveling in Europe all summer, mostly without Portia, who I gathered was interning at a fashion magazine in New York and was now headed back to college for her junior year. I wanted both to picture her and to block her out, so that I had a filmy image of her as a drowned princess or a girl frozen in a magazine.

Being in the Schells' living room, among their many possessions, cast a sheen of formality back over Olivier and me, and we started conversing seriously. I tried hard to ignore the fact that each of his words was a little drumbeat between my legs.

"Lydia and I were good roommates," he said. "She got me on this routine of starting with her Kirs around five."

We looked at an ornate clock that had been taken down by the painters and was leaning against a striped silk ottoman. A fraying wire connected the clock to a hole in the wall above the mantel. It was quarter to five.

"We're knocking off early," I tried to laugh.

I had to stop myself from drinking too quickly and asking too many questions. My curiosity about this household was intense, but so was my awareness that Olivier was completely bound up in it.

After three Kirs with no food, I began to feel dizzy. Struggling to my feet, I said I had to go to bed. I couldn't even count the hours since I had last slept. The jet lag was catching up to me.

Didn't I want some dinner?

"No thank you." Mom had taught me what a waste of time it was to long for the unattainable.

"Goodbye, then." But I couldn't quite close the door. "Maybe when you're back between Italy and the States? Are you staying in Paris for a day or two then?" I hoped I sounded nonchalant. "Will you stay here?"

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

I blushed.

He smiled sadly. "But I might not be able to help myself," he said. Flecks of green melted in his brown eyes as he leaned in for what I realized in the nick of time was a double-cheek kiss. The curls that only this morning had seemed such a rare vision actually brushed my neck, and then it was over.

I stumbled backward.

"Not sure of my exact dates yet," he whispered, "but I'll see you in two or three weeks."

As soon as I reached my own tiny space, I knew I was too tipsy and tired to unpack. But I did manage to rummage for a half-eaten turkey sandwich I had leftover from the plane. My first dinner in Paris, alone, staring out at a sea of blinking windows. I had no idea what I was doing here. This was not the Paris of Jacques and Solange, bound by all the limitations of decency, where I first discovered how faithfully I could draw in the illustrated letters I sent home. This was a city whose shapes were still unclear. I had no idea what tomorrow would look like, except that it would be empty of the only person I thought I needed to see.

I forced down a final chalky bite.

I wondered what Olivier might have whipped up for me in the kitchen downstairs. A recipe of his mother's? Of Lydia's?

In a couple of weeks, he would pass through my life again, on his way back to Portia, whom we had hardly touched upon all day. Slender Portia of the toile and the bed skirt. Portia who was not me.

four

Lydia had told me that my sixth-floor maid's room, the garret that came attached to "every Paris apartment," would have a view of the Luxembourg Gardens. When I woke that first morning to the alarm on my digital watch, I looked out to the promised sliver of green visible through rain-glossed rooftops.

I had not told Lydia that my cousins had not had a maid's room, or a *cave* for their wine for that matter, nor had I told her that it might be a problem for me to pay the $400-a-month rent for her maid's room out of my salary. I had said that, of course, I understood, and I had implied that I was among the lucky few who did not have to worry about such things. The world was elitist, and this was a funny if slightly embarrassing fact. Common knowledge. The *chambre de bonne* with a view, *c'était normal,* normal at any price.

The rooftops and the little corner of Luxembourg trees in my line of sight were glossy and trembling. The room was spartan, but I took my time in arranging it with my few things. I had an hour before Lydia was to call me with my first instructions.

On an old trunk, I made a neat pile of books next to a framed black and white snapshot of my mother and father with me as a plump five-year-old with short hair, outsized eyes and an unsure smile for the camera. Dad was already sick in the picture. His own smile was strained, but he was still trying. Mom had unimaginably

long hair and a roundness to her that I couldn't actually remember, but the firm set of her mouth was the same as today.

I put my clothes on wire hangers on a bare metal bar, next to the single futon on the floor.

"We bought the futon for the last assistant because the springs in the old bed were simply gone," Lydia had said. "It's so comfortable that I'm a little jealous. Maybe we'll get one for Portia. Can you imagine? Portia on a futon on the floor? She'd probably love it. She's always saying she hates her bedroom in Paris, that it's too precious."

My bathroom was tiny and strange, a shower stall with a curtain that didn't quite reach the floor and an electric toilet that made an alarming suction sound. The door was plastic and folded like an accordion. The sink was outside, next to a camping stove and a tiny refrigerator. In the cupboard by the refrigerator, I found a few dishes and a box of verveine tea bags. There was still sugar in the sugar bowl, but otherwise there was no sign of the disastrous assistant who had preceded me.

The string of events that led me to this garret was so tenuous that I believed it might snap at any moment and send me hurtling back across the Atlantic to the nothingness from which I'd come, to Peter, the noncommittal boyfriend who finally called it off, to the professors who told me that I had to outgrow my delusion that accurate contour drawing was art, to the mother who said she would hire me an LSAT tutor if I promised to get my act together.

It was only this past May that Lydia called me at school to say she had gotten my letter and résumé. She liked the fact that I had been a volunteer lifeguard in Nicaragua. Was my French really fluent? She needed to fire the assistant she had in Paris because she wasn't working out. "I am far from uptight, but this girl has no morals." Her voice was hoarse and breathy. So could I take the train into the city as soon as possible to meet with her? "I'm in the Village," she said.

"Of course. I'll come tomorrow."

I was stunned that she had responded to me.

One of my college roommates had told me about the job with Lydia Schell. "I used to be friends with her daughter, Portia. They're both kind of crazy, mother and daughter, but pretty brilliant. She always needs an assistant in Paris and it's probably an interesting gig. Write to her. You can use my name."

So, I had gone to the library and found books of Lydia Schell's photographs. I had quickly learned that she had been a part of everything that mattered in recent history. I had written to her.

Lydia had made her name photographing the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War protests. Now she traveled all over the world, but she was based in Europe as a magazine correspondent, mostly for *Vanity Fair* of late. She was famous for a framing device whereby her pictures looked like they were from the point of view of one of their own subjects. They felt very intimate, but they told far-reaching and important stories.

After initial skepticism, Mom had been suitably impressed by my reports of Lydia Schell's fame to support my effort. This was why she had sacrificed to send me to a good school, so that I would have this kind of opportunity. But I shouldn't simply drift on it. I should make sure I always knew where the opportunity was taking me because people like us could not afford not to be practical.

"So, you're telling me she's in the big leagues," said Mom, with the beginnings of approval.

"Mom, she probably won't even answer my letter."

"Well, then it won't have been for you, will it? And you can use your French in a law firm. Max said he would be able to get you a paralegal job in any major city in the world in a heartbeat." She took a rare pause. "But they do say," she went on, "that law schools are looking for variety these days. Think about how that week in Nicaragua helped you get into college. You wrote such a great essay about it, remember? So your law school application may end up stronger if you work for this woman."

"Is that why you let me go to Nicaragua? To give me a better shot at college. Well, Mom, don't get your hopes up."

But when Lydia did answer me, I took the train from New

Haven into New York City the next day and found my way from Grand Central Station to the Christopher Street subway stop. I had only been to Manhattan a handful of times, had no mental map of it, and did not picture it this cozy and leafy. The streets were sun-dappled and people looked friendly.

Lydia's New York home was a four-story townhouse. I rang the bell and was let into a foyer by a maid who turned quickly away. It smelled like wet paint.

"Hello! Is this color terrible?" Lydia came toward me, hand outstretched. She swallowed audibly and looked alarmed at the lavender walls. There was a slight bulge to her eyes that made them catch light like fruit in a still life. They glistened with the sheen of the fresh paint. Although I did not know what color the insides of townhouses were supposed to be, my instinct told me that she was displeased with the lavender and that I should be too.

"It might be a little too Eastery," I ventured, "for a first impression of such a great house."

"I couldn't agree more. My husband has no eye for color. But this is far from the worst of it. You have to come see what he's done in here." She led me into a living room with tarps over the furniture and gestured to the walls. "This looks like a melon, doesn't it? The man wants me to feel like I'm living inside a melon."

"You think it's on purpose?"

"So you agree that it looks like a goddamn cantaloupe in here? We see eye-to-eye on this? I have to know so he doesn't think it's just me being difficult."

"Well, it's definitely fruity. Maybe a little darker than a cantaloupe, though? Maybe you could tell your husband it looks like a papaya."

"Don't get me started on papayas. Have you heard about this papaya diet? The enzyme that's supposed to make you lose weight? I'm going to start again as soon as I get back to Europe. Have you ever done it? It's disgusting, but it works."

"I like papayas."

"Well maybe we can do it together, then. You and me and

Portia. We'll do it when she comes during her school breaks. Then it won't be quite so miserable. Anyway, I'm sorry the place is such a shambles. Let's go into the dining room and sit down. They haven't started on this room yet. It's not going to be green anymore. Green is supposed to be an unappetizing color. I don't know what we were thinking. We haven't painted in about ten years. We're going to do red this time. Maybe you could take a look at the swatches on the table. And there's a menu there. I hope you like Chinese food. I was going to order lunch." She began rummaging through papers on the dining room table. "God, I can't find it! No one puts anything away around here." She walked to a doorway and yelled up a mahogany staircase. "Joshua! Joshua! Where's the Excellent Dumpling House menu?"

No answer from Joshua. Lydia's eyes shone a sad pale green. "I think I know what happened," she said. "The maid is on the rampage against us ever since Portia's boyfriend started sleeping over. It's breaking her heart. She's been with us since before Portia was born, and suddenly I'm a terrible mother in her eyes and my lovely daughter is turning into a slut. It's more than she can take, I think. She can't keep track of anything. And she's throwing stuff out right and left as though she owned the place."

"Is this the menu?" I asked.

"You godsend, you. So have a seat and tell me what you'd like and then we'll get down to business."

Not wanting to seem indecisive or difficult, I read out the first dish I spotted under the lunch specials. "Beef with broccoli."

"Are you sure? The orange beef is better."

"Orange beef is probably more interesting. I'll try it."

"It comes with spring rolls. Do you want spring rolls?"

"Absolutely!"

"Because if you don't want them, my son Joshua will eat them. I'm going to give him mine. Spring rolls are one of the few things he'll eat. He's in a phase."

"I'm sure I don't need my spring rolls. Chinese food is always so big."

"Yes, but in a few weeks we'll be living on papayas, remember? Give me a second."

She went through a swinging door into a kitchen with a big island in the middle, stacked with magazines and newspapers. Cast iron pots hung dangerously over her head as she dialed the Excellent Dumpling House.

I looked around the dining room. An arrestingly pretty and delicate blond looked out at me from a red-leather-framed picture on the sideboard. This must be Portia. I took a step toward her, saw that she had her mother's overround eyes and that there was a bitter undertone to her smile. She had a golden dusting of freckles, which made me think the picture had been taken during the summer, on some exotic vacation. I had always wanted freckles.

Lydia ordered our lunch without ceremony and came back to me.

"So I take it you know nothing about photography, which is good. I'm not looking for an apprentice. That's part of the problem with the girl I have now. She wants to be me and she can't believe it might take a little work. That and she acts like she was raised by wolves. Wakes up with a different boy every morning. But anyway, you're a painter? You have an eye?"

"Not really. Not that kind." My eyes skidded over the green walls. In my letter to her, I had written that I was interested in fine arts, in all that Paris had to teach me. I hadn't been specific. But she had paint on the brain, and besides I was twenty-two and I ought to have an ambition by now. Something beyond the simple love of drawing. By this point in life, you had to want to be something, even if it was going to change. You needed direction.

"I do dream of being a painter," I stammered. "But I love photography too. I mean I appreciate photography. I could never do it myself. I'm inspired by it though. I think your work is amazing. And your writing about photography. Your books. Everything. I grew up with *Changes* and *Human Landscapes*. So, I feel like I know you. And through you, ever since I was little, I feel like I knew Martin Luther King."

"What a lovely thing to say. So, were you really a lifeguard in

Nicaragua? I was down there, you know. I did some great work on the Sandanista Literacy Campaign."

"I saw your photo of Ortega getting the Nobel Prize for vaccinating so many children."

"You liked that shot? My family hated it. They thought it was creepy."

"I thought it was moving. And something about the angle—I can't explain it—it felt like it was taken from the perspective of a young child."

"Nice to know somebody notices things. Anyway, what about your French? It has to be good, you know. All my business in Europe is done in French. All the important agencies are French now. I need you to promise it's decent."

I thought about breaking into French, but decided not to because something told me that hers might not be so great, even though she was a genius.

When our lunch came, we ate on Limoges china that she said she had just inherited and was on the fence about. The china was kept in a piece of furniture that was called a hutch, I learned. I did not touch my spring rolls.

"I'll put these away for Joshua," she said, then she yelled up the stairs again, "Joshua!" In the ensuing silence, she cleared her throat. "He'll be down to forage after dark. So, do you have any questions about the job? As I say, it's a little bit of everything."

I had no idea what she meant, but I wanted it. "It sounds fantastic."

"But I haven't told you about the money yet, have I? Condé Nast is so cheap—and they're my only steady client these days, because you can't count on the agencies for anything—that I'm embarrassed to say this is the kind of job you can't take unless you have another means of support. Jesus, it's so elitist to talk like this I should be shot, but you know how it is."

I nodded.

"So, they give me a hundred and fifty a week for an assistant. But they only pay part of the rent on my Paris apartment and the

assistant has to rent the maid's quarters, you know the *chambre de bonne* up on the sixth floor. It's a great little garret, very romantic, with a sublime glimpse of the Luxembourg through a dormer window. You'll love it. That's about four hundred a month, which doesn't leave a whole lot. So, you'll need help from your family."

"That shouldn't be a problem," I lied again.

Lydia told me the house in Paris was being painted too and would surely look like Beirut. She might not be there when I arrived in September to begin work, but her husband, Clarence, surely would because he was taking a sabbatical this school year to write in Paris. She hoped I would stop him from doing anything too hideous with the walls.