

Three

“What strange places our lives can carry us to, what dark passages.”

—Justin Cronin, *The Passage*

France. Land of fine wine, delicious food, rich culture, and great art. Also, as I am soon to discover, its own share of dysfunctional families. Slipped between sunset on home and sunrise on Berkeley is a long night in France as an exchange student—365 days of the most bizarre experiences I will ever have. Afterward, when I am back to tell the story, people will ask why I stayed. I stay because pretending things are fine is what I do.

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” says Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*. Coming from one uniquely unhappy family, I will meet and live with two uniquely unhappy French families in my year there. My mother once said, it seemed to me rather defensively, “Every family is dysfunctional.” I remember resenting the idea, as though she were excusing the dysfunction in our family when I wanted her to take responsibility for it. After my experiences in France, I will wonder if she is right.

It all starts off well enough, arriving in Paris with a group of twenty American teenagers in July of 1980. The organization responsible for coordinating our host families wants us to have a quintessentially French experience our first night and takes us to see a live production of *Les Misérables*. I understand not a word, a bad sign I think. In hindsight, it may have been a bad omen as well.

My first host family and, if things had gone according to plan, what would have been my only host family, lives just outside Montauban, a medieval red-brick town about an hour south of

Toulouse, not far from the border with Spain. My host family has sent a daughter abroad the same year I am to live with them; like me she is seventeen and will be spending her exchange student year in New York. I am settled into her sunny bedroom overlooking the garden.

A heretofore unquestioned policy in the exchange-student organization has allowed my new family, the Barniers, to receive me into their home without so much as a screening simply because they have sent a child abroad via the same organization. This will prove to be a serious misjudgment, and my experience with them will spell a hasty end to said policy.

Colette and Bernard Barnier are simple folk, far from my fantasy of the stylish, sophisticated Europeans I've nurtured through six years of junior high and high school French. Bernard's thick rug of chest hair protrudes over the neck of his tank top, which, because of his large belly, protrudes over his too-tight, too-short shorts. Colette's bouffant hair, cat-eye glasses, and scarf tied under her chin evoke the black-and-white women of *I Love Lucy*.

They work a small farm with the help of two swarthy young men from town, men who yet again seem to have no interest in me, despite my blue mascara, high-heeled Candie's, and an at-last slimmed-down physique.

The Barniers are good to me. Colette teaches me to make French pastry, and Bernard reads me stories from the local newspaper, helping me to practice the language I will live in for the next twelve months. I can't wait to start school, looking forward to showing off a little as I repeat my senior year of high school at the local *lycée*. Finally mine, I hope, will be the carefree school experience I'd lost through all the humiliation with Libby. Picturing myself the object of flattering attention as *l'Américaine*, my thoughts ripple happily along until the afternoon I find Bernard lying on my bed.

“Come here, *chérie*,” he calls. “Come lie beside me.”

I go stiff, and a sickening apprehension floods my belly, squeezing its way up into my chest. I work at keeping my face impassive, a slight crocodile adaptation, while alarm bells go off in my brain.

“*Non, merci*,” I chirp brightly and back out the door.

Pretending nothing is wrong works with magical, circular effect. If I don’t react with alarm, it normalizes the behavior in question, and normalizing makes it feel normal, nothing to be alarmed about. Still, a forty-something man wanting me to lie on a twin bed with him only days after meeting requires some action on my part.

I locate Colette in the kitchen and, keeping my voice as light as possible, ask, “Why is Bernard lying on my bed?”

“He and our daughter lie there together listening to music. He wants you to feel like part of the family.”

She smiles sweetly at me, clearly sincere.

“Oh, that’s nice,” I lie.

A bad feeling, odious and sour, slides over me from head to toe. I know this is not okay, at least I think I do. I’m not the best judge of healthy boundaries in a family. What is certain is that I am seven thousand miles away from anyone or anything familiar and isolated on a farm without the ability to communicate fully.

Pretending takes on almost life-or-death importance, a Stockholm syndrome allegiance to the people I depend on for survival. The hope I brought with me, that things would be better once I left home, evaporates. I focus on making the Barniers think I’m happy, grateful for their

hospitality. Pastry instruction and newspaper reading continue, and I casually make excuses to avoid Bernard in my bedroom. I am almost comfortable with this new layer of pretending, a hardening of my survival mask that actually makes me feel safer, when Colette presents a new challenge: she doesn't like it that I don't eat meat.

Californians are often the vanguard of new trends, especially those of an ecological or new age nature; I am not one of them. My only reason for not eating meat is that the idea of eating a dead body makes me ill. Colette, however, cannot accept this anathema to farm life. First she tries sneaking meat into my food.

“Donna,” (pronounced Dough-NAH), “how do you like the casserole?” Colette beams.

“It's very good, *merci*,” I answer politely and truthfully.

“Aha! I put a little meat in there! You see, you like meat! You're not a vegetarian!”

“Yes, I am!” I push my plate away, stung by the trick and unnerved that I have just eaten flesh.

I thereafter surreptitiously inspect my food before I eat it, removing any meat to my napkin as discreetly as possible. Colette is not fooled.

Outside at the rabbit hutch a few days later, she calls to me. “Come here, Donna, I want you to see something.”

She holds up a small brown *lapin* with quivering whiskers and velvety soft fur. I stroke lightly down the rabbit's back not wanting to scare it, but Colette pushes my hand away.

“*Non!*” she says.

Gripping the soft folds behind its neck like a cat would hold its kitten, Colette plunges a knife into the rabbit's throat and twists, releasing a small river of blood down its jerking body. I

am in yet another dream, a horrific nightmare, my eyes fixed in a stranglehold on the now-still rabbit hanging limp in Colette's hand, its fur matted with quickly darkening blood. The sight and the smell make me want to vomit, but she is oblivious to my distress.

“You see, Donna,” Colette says with her sweet smile, “this is what we do in the country. We kill animals, and we eat them.”

I nod dumbly. I don't know what else to do. My mask hardens further. I shrink even deeper into myself and let Colette win. I will eat meat now. How I manage it, I'm not sure, except that pretending works in both directions; I fool myself almost as much as I fool anyone else.

Like a frog placed in cold water and cooked while the heat slowly increases, I am lulled by my own pretending that the first two incidents are anything other than freakish. The third incident, however, is so ludicrous that the temperature rockets up past all ability to normalize. Even I, after a few more weeks of my most strenuous efforts to make everything okay, will have to jump out of the pot.

Colette accuses me of being pregnant.

Two months of my very long year have passed, and I have not had a period yet. Later in life, when my body's dramatic reactions to stress are a given, it will all become clear. For now I have no explanation when she confronts me. Holding a pair of my underwear from the laundry, Colette snaps off the television in the living room where I am practicing my French by watching the local news.

“Donna, I see no blood on your underwear since you are here. You have no menses, you are pregnant.”

Embarrassed heat spreads over my face as she examines my most vulnerable item of clothing. In shades of the old humiliation, I am helpless to stop her.

“Colette!” I say tightly, “I am not pregnant! I can’t be,” I insist, “I’ve never been with a boy.”

Colette shakes her head vigorously.

“*Non, chérie, non!* It is not necessary for you to have sexual relations with a man to become pregnant.”

In a more conciliatory, almost educational tone, she goes on. “If you have been sitting on a chair where a man has been sitting, or swimming in a pool where a man has been swimming, you can become pregnant.”

I stare at her, my mind turning each phrase over and over until I’m sure I’ve heard correctly. As French goes, these are not difficult words, and after a long moment, I realize that I have indeed understood her meaning. I have no answer, either in French or in English, but I try again anyway.

“Colette, I promise, I am not pregnant!”

She doesn’t hear me, or doesn’t listen, but carries on.

“We will love you and the baby, *bien sûr*, but the village will be scandalized. We can’t let you start school. You must stay at home until the baby is born.”

I have overcome Bernard on my bed by being creative. I have handled if not overcome Colette and the rabbit by giving in to her, eating meat at every meal. With this latest incident, there is no creativity and no giving in that will make me pregnant or her rational. An admixture of panic, horror, and dread strangles my sense of being able to cope.

“Colette, please!” I beg. “I’m not pregnant! Please let me start school!”

“Donna,” Colette commands, “you must take a pregnancy test.”

Perhaps I’m not rational myself. Perhaps taking a pregnancy test would convince her, but the pitch-black crush in my mind prevents me from seeing that option. I’m filled only with desperation to save myself from something I cannot handle.

“No!” I shout. “I am not going to take a pregnancy test!” and I bolt for my room, which is mercifully vacant for a change.

My plan to avoid Colette and Bernard and to hope, as usual, that pretending nothing is wrong will work, does, at least temporarily. The next morning at breakfast, no one speaks of the pregnancy; we go on as before. This, at least, is familiar.

September arrives with its brilliantly yellowing leaves and school buses trundling hordes of riders back and forth without me. Every few days, I plead with Colette to let me start at the *lycée*, but she just shakes her head. Yellow becomes orange-and-red October.

One morning at breakfast, Colette surprises me.

“Today we take you into town to buy some new clothes,” she says without explanation. “You may start school tomorrow.”

Relief overwhelms curiosity as to why she has suddenly changed her mind. See? I tell myself, everything is going to be fine.

“*Merci*, Colette, *oh merci!*” I thank her profusely.

It is a family trip into town on gently curving roads marked with the detritus of autumn, Bernard at the wheel of his metallic-gray Citroën CX. When he cuts the engine, however, I

notice that rather than a clothing store, he has stopped in front of a building whose sign advertises *Gynécologue*.

A blow of sick comprehension knocks everything into place: the refusal to let me start school for over a month, the sudden change of heart, the offer to buy me a new outfit first. This isn't about school at all; this is still about a pregnancy test, another trick. The primitive part of my brain, the fight-or-flight instinct given to all creatures, reacts without thought.

Flinging open the car door, I tear down the sidewalk, ignoring the Barniers' angry shouts behind me. As I run, something I will later come to believe is God's hand over my life lifts my attention to a large stone building on the right carved with the words *Bureau de Poste*. The thought comes into my mind, *You can make a collect call from the post office*. I don't remember knowing that before. I don't know how I know it now, but I hurtle through the massive front doors in frantic search of a phone.

Along the side wall is a row of empty *cabines téléphoniques*. Scrambling into the first one, I slam the pleated door closed and grab the receiver. I dial "0" and drop into a crouch at the bottom of the booth, terrified that Bernard and Colette will find me. I am panting so hard, as much from panic as running, that the operator can hardly understand my jumbled French.

"*Excusez-moi?*" she asks sharply.

"I said, *s'il vous plaît*, please help me! I need to call Paris!"

I have no phone number for the agency that placed me with Colette and Bernard, but the operator is able to connect me rather quickly on a collect call.

"*Bonjour,*" says a female voice.

“My name is Donna,” I pant, still in a frenzy. “You placed me with a family here! I can’t go back! You have to come get me! Please!”

“Shhhh, it weel be oh-kay, Donna,” she says soothingly. “I weel help you. Where are you?”

“I’m at the post office in Montauban in a phone booth. Can you come get me now? They’re going to find me!”

I squeeze back tears, alone and trembling in a foreign world, now dependent on a reassuring stranger at the other end of a phone for survival. The minimal composure I’ve maintained throughout the whole ordeal begins to thin as I sense her compassion. Falling apart is an unfamiliar luxury, only possible now because she is there, whoever she is.

The woman gathers basic information from my mumbled responses, tells me to stay where I am, that someone will drive down from the Toulouse office. When she says, “*Adieu*,” I’m too scared to stand up and replace the receiver in case Colette and Bernard see me. I let it hang, bracing my feet against the door to keep them out, my will the only thing holding me together.

Some children are born more strong willed than others. Religious-minded parents, who tend to see order and meaning in such things, point to the divine matching of will with trials the child will face in life. On the floor of the phone booth, gripping my head, whether prepared for this trial from birth or only lucky enough to endure it, I refuse to surrender.

When help arrives, one man and one woman, my composure is back. One staff member stays with me at the post office while the other collects my things from the Barnier house. Despite everything that has happened, I feel guilty for leaving. Somehow this is my fault. I don’t

ask and don't want to know what Colette and Bernard said about me when my belongings were removed, for good, from their home.

My two young rescuers don't speak much during the almost seven-hour drive to Paris. The black Renault, tuned to Radio France, moves steadily down the highway while in the backseat I cut deeper grooves into the now less-delicate etchings. I had been so sure that home was the problem, but in the backseat of the Renault, in a quicksand of shame, I blame myself for every bad thing that has happened since I arrived in France.

It is dusk by the time the car reaches Paris, the city of lights so beautiful, so thrilling to be close to, it sparks my inextinguishable hope that things will be better now. We exit the highway a few minutes later and crunch gravel in the driveway of a small, boxy house. The woman in the passenger seat turns around.

"The familiee that leeves here ees verree nice," she tells me. "They weel be your temporaree familiee."

Like a foster child, I am placed with Philippe and Caroline Pilon in a rainy, northeast suburb of Paris. They are not a host family but agree to help because their twin daughters are presently exchange students in Iowa. They also have a fifteen-year-old son, Marc, who, I am told, is meant to enjoy this year of attention out from under his sisters' shadow. He looks decidedly unhappy that I am here.

Philippe, mostly gray, slightly soft in the middle, and never far from a wineglass, is meek and soft-spoken. Caroline, the kind of fashionable Frenchwoman I had envisioned, has short, dark hair and small, very white teeth. Her low, breathy voice is delightfully mellifluous until she berates Philippe; then it turns hard and squawky. They will divorce the following year.

Starting the next evening, and every evening for a week, the phone jangles with bad news from the exchange-student organization: they can't find a host family for me, it is too late in the year. Each call ends the same way, impossible not to hear no matter where I am in the tiny house.

“*Non!* We don't want her! *Non!* She can't stay!” squawks Caroline night after night.

I can't offer to leave since I have nowhere to go. My hope of better things fades again, the bright light I cling to dimming quickly. I am at the mercy of whatever plan is made for me, and both sides are driving hard. A week later, and I suspect with some financial compensation, Caroline gives in, grudgingly. I am told in no uncertain terms that this is Marc's year, and I am not to bother him or draw attention away from him. My vision of being the exciting *l'Américaine* goes up in a poof as I make it my business to become as invisible as possible. It is markedly easy given all of my practice. I come out of my room only for school, dinner, and to help with the ironing. The Pilon family does not own a dryer, so clothing, napkins, sheets—everything—must be taken off the clothesline and ironed. Before long, it becomes solely my responsibility, hours of it each day.

School, as had happened in San Diego, becomes my escape. My new friend Laure, already pear-shaped at seventeen, smokes Rothschild cigarettes and wears heavy, blue eyeliner. Under her tutelage, I pluck my eyebrows for the first time, and finally, my parents are galvanized into reaction. I have written home every week detailing Bernard on my bed, the rabbit, the pregnancy test, and the foster family. My parents have simply written back with news of home. Now they are goaded into an actual response.

“Your beautiful eyebrows! What have you done?” my mother writes back after I send home a picture of me in my Camargue boots and black-and-white kaffiyeh. “Your father and I

are so disappointed!”

Laure tutors me in the enchantments of smoking as well, which at first aren't enchanting at all. My brand is Marlboro Reds, and the first time I smoke a whole one, I'm so ill I have to lie down. Yet the seductive adolescent cool is enough to outweigh my nausea, and I push forward to acquire the taste. By the time I return to the US, I will be smoking a pack and a half a day. When Caroline finds out that I am smoking, it is *c'est la vie*, no big deal. She does not smoke, a rarity among the French, but Philippe smokes Gauloises, short unfiltered cigarettes that reek of Turkish tobacco and go so well with red wine.

A month of ironing later, I turn eighteen, two weeks before Marc turns sixteen. Despite the prohibition against stealing any of his attention, I am invited to celebrate my birthday at his party. There is plenty of smoking and what in America would be called underage drinking. It is my first time tasting alcohol, and in part due to the alcohol and in part due to the ever-deepening etchings, it will also be my first time with a boy.

Finally a boy likes me, I think, confusing what is about to happen with anything remotely personal. Oblivious, like most eighteen-year-olds, to the watchful eyes of others, we slip into my bedroom sometime during the party.

At dinner the next evening, Caroline announces, "*Elle a les lèvres usées*," an expression to describe my deflowering that is so vulgar, literally, "She has used lips," that I flush with the familiar shameful heat.

It is hard to say whether the birthday party is highlight or lowlight of my year in France. Perhaps it is both. The boy I thought was my boyfriend dumps me when I gain weight over Christmas, and I resume hiding in my bedroom but for the ironing and dinner.

The pink bursting of cherry trees in spring and finally the green of summer herald the countdown for my departure. Giddy and a little careless, I join Philippe one night in his red wine fest. Caroline is out with her lover again, and Philippe unburdens himself. Alcohol flows, Philippe becomes maudlin, and I become intoxicated. Mistaking his openness with me as an invitation to do likewise, I slur a *faux pas*.

“You’ve never wanted me here. I’m just the maid. All I do is iron.”

The relief at finally being able to speak truth relaxes me even more than the wine.

“*Non, non, non*, I do want you here. It’s Caroline that’s the problem,” Philippe sympathizes with me. “I’m sorry she is so *misérable*.”

“She is *misérable*,” I petulantly, drunkenly, agree. “I’m glad this is almost over.”

The wine gone, I stagger off to my bedroom, a brown and pink cacophony of wallpaper and bedspread that is spinning along with my head. Just before adding a nice Bordeaux accent to the carpet, I pass out on the bed.

Tonight, my junior store of wisdom expands with timeless truth: never give a scorned husband ammunition against his adultering wife. Their shouting wakes me up, and through my throbbing, I recognize Caroline in my room. Cawing something I can’t decipher, she grabs my arm and yanks me into a sitting position. I smell cognac’s subtle, floral bouquet.

“How dare you say I treat you like *la domestique*!” Caroline screeches. “After everything I’ve done for you!” She squeezes my arm harder. “What kind of ungrateful girl are you?”

Another accident of birth, or gift from God depending on your point of view, is crystal-clear mental acuity when threatened. Like perfect pitch, either it is there or it isn’t. Under assault

from Caroline, my mind turns instantly cloudless and sharp, freed from its drunken sludge; the words line up like soldiers just waiting their turn.

“*Oh non*, Caroline, I’m so sorry, Philippe must have misunderstood me. I never said you treat me like the maid.”

Her grip loosens, and the soldiers march on.

“I’m the one to blame for acting like the maid. I hide behind the ironing. I should give more of myself to you and your family.”

Mollified, she lets go of my arm completely.

“Never mind, *chérie*, sweet dreams,” she purrs and exits the bedroom to resume fighting with Philippe, her voice taking up its guttural harshness.

I don’t move when she leaves, impressed by my quick reaction to her. France, for all of its turmoil, is a turning point in my self-confidence, both the kind that will take me far in life and the kind that will isolate me from others. It’s a proven fact, I tell myself, that I can pretend my way through anything, harden myself against anyone, survive any situation. My traumatized, overconfident-by-way-of-compensation conclusion is that I don’t need anyone. I can take care of myself. Dead from the neck down, I convince myself that I can make it entirely on my own. The truth is, I will have to for a long time.

Tension, thick as smoke, permeates the Pilon house in the days that follow, a short six months away from their divorce. My crocodile self circles stealthily from bedroom to ironing board to dinner exactly seventeen more times. I am back in San Diego to watch the televised wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer on July 29, 1981, my only souvenir from France a quickly passing fancy for all things European.

In a month, I will leave for UC Berkeley. The television someone has put in my bedroom while I was gone means I no longer need the slouchy beanbag chair to numb myself with a steady diet of cathode rays. My old distraction just as faithfully shields me from unpleasant reality, like the awful arithmetic that calculates my score as zero for three nurturing families in my first eighteen years.

As day after benumbed day ticks by, that old unquenchable hope rises again that things will be better now, that at college I will unearth the treasure of human connection I crave. Still so blind, still so sadly unaware, I fail to recognize that my unhealed past will shape each attempt.