



FRENCH BY  
HEART

REBECCA S. RAMSEY



BROADWAY BOOKS  
New York



# *French by Heart*



An

*American Family's*

*Adventures*

in

*La Belle France*



REBECCA S. RAMSEY

# Contents

[le Page](#)

[edication](#)

[nowledgments](#)

[uthor's Note](#)

[ologue](#)

[La Tornade](#)

[Le Début](#)

[Rue des Bosquets](#)

[First Conversations](#)

[Door Number Three](#)

[20, allée des Cerisiers](#)

[Madame Mallet Meets the Americans](#)

[Chèques, Please](#)

[Plenty of Time](#)

[. Monsieur Rougé, the Piano Man](#)

[. Bijoux for My Birthday](#)

[. Emergency Room](#)

[. Joyeux Noël](#)

[. French Skin](#)

[. Project Benjamin](#)

[. Madame Bernard's Elixir of Youth](#)

[. Todd's New Pal](#)

[. Glinda](#)

[. Ambassadrice to the Second Grade](#)

[. Madame Mallet to the Rescue](#)

[. Pâté for Cats](#)

[. Les Pêcheurs](#)

[. Those Crazy Church People](#)

- [. Blessed Mary](#)
- [. Corsica Man](#)
- [. 11 Septembre](#)
- [. New Year's with La Patriote](#)
- [. Grant Takes on France](#)
- [. Jeanne d'Arc and the Baptists](#)
- [. Daffodils](#)
- [. Marie-France Rousseau, Maîtresse Extraordinaire](#)
- [. Grandmère Bonnabry](#)
- [. Closest and Dearest](#)
- [. A Home for the Greatest Show on Earth](#)
- [. Birds](#)
- [. Pride Goeth](#)
- [. My Friends, the Disenchanted](#)
- [. Jamais la Première Cigarette!](#)
- [. Au Revoir](#)

*[ench by Heart](#)*

*[out the Author](#)*

*[pyright](#)*

*for Madame Mallet affectueusement*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Warm and sincere thanks to my talented editors and friends at Broadway Books. To Alison Presley, for believing in the book, having a vision of what it could be, and spending countless hours helping me shape it. To Jenna Thompson, for picking up my book downstream, polishing it to a shine, and guiding me through to the end. And to Charlie Conrad, for all of his ideas, support, and direction.

Thanks also to the circle of girlfriends who became my sisters in France; particularly to Leah Radulescu, for giving me the courage to tell the whole truth, even when it made me look ridiculous, to Susan Wallace, for her enthusiasm and creative inspiration, and to Linda Panning, for reading umpteen rewrites of chapter after chapter and still laughing when I hoped she would.

And the biggest thank-you ever to my sweet family. Thanks to my mother, Judy Skaggs, for being my very own personal cheerleader, and to my daddy, Wayne Skaggs, for showing me the world, one drainage research plot at a time. Thanks to Sarah, Ben, and Sam for allowing me to share all their stories, even the embarrassing ones. And thanks especially to Todd, for always loving me through everything, no matter where in the world we live.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am home now. The azaleas are in full bloom, and I'm back to the world of school carpools and soccer practice, of church suppers and orthodontist appointments, of pork barbecue and pecan pie. But on a painted shelf below my sunny South Carolina window, a bevy of old French alarm clocks with their art deco numbers and little ball feet reminds me of a life when time barely ticked by. A life in which my family walked through each weeklong day arm in arm, shocked by the purple clouds, the black Auvergne soil, the smell of soup cooking for someone's breakfast, and the sounds of our neighbor Alain practicing his trumpet during his two-hour lunch break from work.

In July of 1999, my husband and I boarded an airplane for the heart of France with our baby Sam, seven-year-old Ben, nine-year-old Sarah, and Katie, our dear old cat. We had no idea what would happen to us, but we hoped to fall in love. Four years passed and we weren't disappointed. We drove to the airport again, feeling once more the tug that comes with leaving home.

This is the story of our life in France, of the American family in the stucco house at number 20, allée des Cerisiers, where the neighbors had never met a foreigner and only savages went barefoot.

## PROLOGUE

### *La Rentrée*

“Parents, children,” said the stern directrice, standing in the school courtyard in front of the teachers. “It is my *something* to *something* you, *something* to a *something something something*. I am very happy to *something something*, these teachers *something something*.”

What was she saying? I watched the other mothers and copied them.

The teachers looked stiff, trying to smile at the crowd and yet appear dignified. Most had very short hair, some dyed in unnatural colors. I had seen hair like that all over France and had told my husband, Todd, how great it was that the French felt absolutely free in their sense of style. But now, seeing it on a teacher, purplish red hair disturbed me.

We weren't in South Carolina anymore. I smiled at my children as if this were just an ordinary first day of school at Cottonwood Elementary, where all the teachers were sweet and had southern accents, except for one foreigner who was maybe from Ohio.

I looked around the crowd of parents and children. Two French boys in knickers and kneesocks wrestled on the asphalt as their skinny mothers, stylish in their skirts and pointy-toed shoes, pulled them up by their ears, fussing at them and pointing at the teachers. The boys instantly tucked in their shirts and stood straight. Little girls and boys from all over the courtyard flitted to their mothers. Even the little French babies, bundled up as if it were winter, stopped whining and began gumming their passies obediently.

Then teachers began stepping forward and calling out names. I watched as they lined up their children, spoke to them firmly, and disappeared with them through the huge doors. A few of the little ones had to be pulled off their mothers. We could still hear them screaming inside. I willed myself not to cry.

It would be Ben's turn soon. My little first-grader, going off to French school. How would he know what to do? I tried to distract myself by pretending to look around casually. There was the enormous school gate. Why was it so tall and reinforced with huge sheets of metal? Were they bolted on for strength, lest the children unite and try a battering ram in their attempt to escape? Or maybe it was to keep the mummies out. I wasn't sure.

Ben tugged at my hand. A teacher was calling again for *Benjamin Ramsey*. With the accent, I hardly recognized the name.

“Oh,” I said, flustered. “Have a great day.” I squeezed his hand and gave him the most positive, encouraging smile I could muster. He walked to the back of the line and waved at me, looking so small. I watched his teacher give the children instructions, and then they marched away from me and through the school doors. I waved again, but he didn’t see me.

Sarah’s class was next. Fourth grade foreign students at *École Saint-Pierre* were put in a class of their own before being thrown in with the French kids. Nevertheless, her teacher insisted on speaking French to the bewildered children, who looked at one another and shrugged their shoulders. Sarah waved goodbye to me nervously, I blew her a kiss, and she followed the group inside.

I stayed there on the asphalt for a few more seconds, holding on to Sam’s stroller, still projecting calm and confidence in case Sarah looked back before the door closed. But she didn’t.

. . .

WERE WE REALLY doing this? I had been thinking about this day for months, wondering how the children would react. From the very first time Todd asked me what I thought about the move, I had been picturing the first day of French school. When it came time to tell the kids about our big impending adventure, Todd and I had been nervous. Their lives of school and friends and soccer and church in sunny Greer were so happy and predictable. What would they think?

We decided to take them out to dinner to tell them. We figured that if moving to France made them happy, we could celebrate, and if it didn’t, they probably wouldn’t throw a fit in front of people.

“We’ve got some special news!” we announced to Ben and Sarah after we settled into our booth at the Dogwood Café.

We ordered, the waitress brought us our tea, and Todd cleared his throat. “You know how Daddy has to go to France sometimes on business trips, and you know how sometimes I bring you things back, and how we always said that maybe one day, we’d all get to go?”

“You mean we’re going?” Sarah said, clapping her hands. “We’re going for spring break?”

Ben didn’t look up, but just kept rolling his Matchbox car back and forth across the table. Sam slumped in his high chair, sucking loudly on his sippy cup.

“Better than spring break, Sarah. Kids, what would you think of moving there? To

France? We'll take all our stuff—all your toys, all our furniture—and they'll put it in a big container and send it over the ocean, and Katie can come too.”

“I don't think a cat could breathe in there,” Ben said, still rolling the car.

“Honey, Katie will ride on the airplane with us,” I said.

Sarah cheered and bubbled on about wanting to live near the Eiffel Tower. Todd explained that we were moving to central France, not Paris, but it would surely be just as fun. She didn't care. She just wanted to know if she could get a red cape like Madeline's and if the houses were all covered with vines like the books said.

Ben didn't say much. We asked him what he thought.

“At least it's not the special news you told us last year. You know,” he said, pointing at Sam drooling in his baby seat. “The last time you said you had special news, we got Sam. One of those is enough.”

By the next day, however, the idea of our move had started to sink in. Sarah told Ben that they speak French words in France, which is different than English, and though she already knew plenty of words like *bonjour* and *au revoir* (the only ones she actually knew), he'd have a lot to learn. Ben made up a song that went, “I hate France and France hates me.” So we found a tutor, which helped considerably. Béatrice was a lady from Switzerland who played color games and taught them how to count to ten. Todd's French colleague disapproved.

“Learning French from a Swiss? Oh, they'll have such an accent!”

We weren't too worried. We were more concerned the children would pick up our southernized French and end up sounding like Foghorn Leghorn in a beret.

As soon as we arrived in France, we continued the preparation for school. I let them watch as much television as they wanted—shows like *La petite maison dans le prairie* (*Little House on the Prairie*) and *Les mystères de l'Ouest* (*Wild Wild West*)—thinking that since they were all in French, some of it might sink in.

Maybe it had worked. Somehow, by the first day of school the children seemed unreasonably calm, and I was the one with the case of nerves. Todd had insisted on making everybody a hot breakfast from scratch, preaching his standard eastern North Carolina sermon about how sausage biscuits gave people confidence and fuel for the hard work ahead. I couldn't eat a thing. The French sausage had strange little bits in it that I couldn't identify, but that wasn't really the problem. The whole idea of leaving my sweet American babies at École Saint-Pierre, with its stern French teachers and its barren asphalt playground, made me a little nauseous.

On our drive to school that morning, I had hoped that Ben and Sarah wouldn't notice that Mommy was trying not to hyperventilate. I was pretty sure that Ben hadn't.

My soon-to-be first-grader sat in the backseat, humming and pulling off Sam's socks just for fun. Ben felt pretty good about school, with his natural seven-year-old confidence. After all, he knew the basics. Todd and I had even tried to work with him, teaching him important words and phrases such as "*Oui, madame,*" and "*Non, madame,*" and "*J'ai besoin de faire pi-pi, s'il vous plait,*" ("I need to go pee-pee, please"). He was even fine with a slight change of name. Béatrice had told me the teachers would probably choose to call him *Benjamin* rather than Ben, as *benne* means "dump truck" in French. I was fine with that. After all, I didn't want people yelling after him, "Hey you, Dump Truck, come here!" We practiced how to say his name, "*Je m'appelle Ba-ja-ma.*"

Before we reached the frenzy of the schoolyard, the walk from our parking space near the train station to school had been dreamily peaceful—so cool and pleasant, except for the occasional piles of dog poop on the sidewalks. Ben renamed rue de Bellevue "Poopedy Street," and served as my lookout for more piles to dodge. I was glad to have help. I couldn't keep my eyes on the sidewalk with so much to look at—flowers dripping down from the balconies, little niches for statues of Mary on the sides of apartment buildings, and ancient walls of stacked black volcanic stone, patched with stucco. I loved how the ivy made the houses look like shaggy faces, some with eyes closed, their shutters fastened, and others wide awake with eyelashes of decorative brick. All of them had rippling tile roof hats and their mouths were heavy old doors, which opened and closed as the people who lived there returned from the *boulangerie* with their fresh breakfast baguettes or from their morning walks with their dogs.

What was it about this place that was so enchanting? Even with my queasiness, I couldn't help feeling charmed by it, from the old brass door knockers shaped like a lady's hand to the women, young and old, with their sultry eyes and obvious confidence. As we walked by the cafés I tried not to stare at the people sitting there, their beautiful French words twirling out of their mouths, mingling with the swirls of coffee perfuming the crisp morning air. I wanted to understand it all, the Frenchness of this place. I wanted to be part of it and for it to be a part of me—a part of us, our family. We hoped to have four years or so in France. Could that happen in four years? We were nervous, yes, but our American hearts were open. Could we be French too, just for a little while? French, not by citizenship, but by heart?

Finally we made it to the huge orange gate of *École Saint-Pierre*, walked in, and found a place on the courtyard to wait. I got my camera out for our annual first-day-of-school pictures and let the children pick where to stand. Sarah found Christy Appleton, an American girl her age who was also starting French school that day. They put their arms around each other as if they were old pals and posed beside the door to the teachers' lounge. I hoped the light was right and you could see their smiles, not to mention the curlicues of cigarette smoke coming out from under the door.

Ben had no one to stand by. I knew there was supposed to be a little British boy his age, but he hadn't arrived yet, so Ben chose to stand outside the gate for his picture.

Ben was wearing shorts and a T-shirt that he had sponge painted in Vacation Bible School back home in South Carolina, the one with what is supposed to be three birds stamped on it that actually look more like ink blobs. I had wanted him to wear one of his nice Penney's shirts with a collar, but he said he liked the bird shirt, so I didn't say anything. While I snapped the picture, one sleeve was drooping down nearly off his shoulder and he was biting his lip, trying to not to topple over with his backpack full of school supplies.

I hoped his supplies were the right ones. I'd heard horror stories from former expatriates about how once the stores in France run out, they don't restock. One lady named Ruth told me her little Hannah got yelled at her first day of first grade because she had the wrong type of fountain pen, and that the poor little thing had to eat Tums for breakfast all the way until Christmas.

My French friend Virginie lent me her husband, Yves, to take me school supply shopping for the kids. Auchan, the *hypermarché*, was decorated with big banners celebrating *la rentrée*, the first day back to school. Stressed-out mothers and fathers were everywhere, armed with their lists, ready to fight over the last *cahier de brouillon*. What was that, anyway? Yves didn't know. According to the pocket dictionary in my purse it was a "notebook of disorganization." Was that right? And was an *ardoise* really a "slate"? Using slates seemed primitive to me, but this was France, not the USA.

The farther we made it down the children's lists, the clearer it was to me that Yves had no idea what he was doing. By the time we finally got to the notebook aisle, jam-packed with hundreds of different kinds of *cahiers*, grouped according to paper weight, page number, dimensions in centimeters, and line type, Yves sheepishly asked me if I'd mind if he went to look at the CDs. He wanted to find that Shania Twain one where she sang, "Man, I feel like a woman."

After dropping the children off at school I went home and tried to stay busy until I couldn't stand the suspense any longer and drove to the gate at three-thirty, a whole hour early. Eventually people started double-parking again and honking at one another, and crowds gathered and finally the directrice opened the gates. The mothers poured in and Sam and I found a place to the side and waited with my new friend Linda and a Finnish lady whose name I couldn't pronounce. Sarah came out skipping and started bubbling over about her French teacher and how her British English teacher says "trousers" instead of "pants" and how "pants" is British for "underwear" and how they say "dog dirt" instead of "dog poop" and how she hated the playground toilet, how you have to squat into a hole, and how she liked the spicy meat they had for their second course at lunch until somebody told her it was pig intestine. I was relieved to see her so happy, but I wasn't too surprised. Sarah always had seemed grown up to me and capable, but what about my little Ben? My heart beat wildly in my chest as I searched the crowd for his face.

I almost cried when I saw him. Ben came out smiling in the middle of his little

French classmates, and I wanted to run to him, but I made myself stand still and wait, as if this were just an ordinary day. When he walked through the crowd, smiling at me and swinging his book bag, I kissed him on the cheek and hugged him.

“Did Madame Chaput give you any homework?” I asked.

“How do I know, Mom?” he said, shrugging his shoulders and then giving me a grin. “All that lady talks is French!”

## 1. *La Tornado*



A month before we left for France, a truck pulling a steel shipping container pulled into Kensington Farm, our neighborhood, and parked in front of our house. It was moving day and Mother had come down from Raleigh to help me with the children. We pulled lawn chairs into my front yard, along with the kiddie pool and a cooler of juice boxes, and tried to keep the kids out of the way. Sitting there sweating, we watched the movers swarm into our house like termites, dismantling furniture and loading our life into the steel box. It was a little rusty. I hoped it was waterproof.

“It will be an adventure,” Mother said, trying to sound confident as Sam fingered her necklace. I sighed at the bittersweetness and agreed that yes, it would. Then a loud noise came from inside and we jerked around to see a mover slip on the carpet at the top of my stairs, sending towels and boxes flying and ripping the oak banister clean off the wall. I watched it sail like a javelin right out the open door and land in my India hawthorns.

That’s when I began to feel like Dorothy, pulled right out of a scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, the one where the twister is whirling and I am in the middle, watching everything pop up in front of me, riding the waves of the wind. There were the towels, and then the banister, and the people—Mother, Todd’s boss, Ben’s soccer coach and Sarah’s choir teacher, my sister-in-law, and the man at the bank. They were all waving and talking to me, though I could barely make out what they were saying.

For six months the tornado had been brewing, starting on a December night right after we had put up the tree and let the kids hang up a few ornaments. Todd had finished the last of the bedtime stories and I had put Sam, our two-month-old, down to sleep. We collapsed on the couch, savoring the stillness of the house in the glow of the Christmas lights, listening to the calm tick-tocking of the mantel clock.

The minute hand twitched forward and Todd broke the silence. “There is a job in France,” he said, and raised his eyebrow into a question mark. My heart fluttered. France? Now? We had talked about going for years. As if on cue, the heat came on, blasting through a ceiling vent and rattling the paper chain the kids had draped on the tree. The little yellow house ornament that I had made for our first Christmas there began to spin on its gold thread, then unwind and spin again, caught in its own little cyclone. I pointed it out to Todd and we laughed at the coincidence.

A move to France? I had been in love with France since I was fifteen, daydreaming myself into the travel posters plastered all over the walls of my high school French class. Mademoiselle Wright was young and blond, and she taught us how to order dinner at a brasserie and how to sing “Sur le pont d’Avignon.” But the best part was when she would pass around pictures she had taken when she was in college and went to Paris with her boyfriend. It was the first time a teacher had ever mentioned a boyfriend, but this class was about romantic France, after all. When Todd first started with Michelin, we had dreamed of getting to go and touring the countryside. He started French lessons and we hoped for a job transfer. But now, settled, with three kids?

The question mark followed me around like a cartoon bubble over my head everywhere I went—into bed or the shower, to church on Christmas Eve and to my parents’ living room in Raleigh as we opened presents. A couple days later we made the drive back to Greer, and as we pulled into the neighborhood, I looked at the houses on our street. We had a nice life in South Carolina. Kensington Farm was a good subdivision, full of perfectly fine vinyl-sided two-story houses, with a swim team, close to the soccer fields and good schools. People decorated their houses for every holiday and there were always pink and blue balloons popping up on mailboxes, announcing more happy children being born into suburbia. The children liked their teachers and I volunteered at school, and on weekends we had soccer games and went to church and spread our mulch like everyone else. And yet that day everything looked gray. Maybe it was the rain. In spite of the hills, the place felt as flat as Dorothy’s prairie.

I tumbled the pictures in my mind of the possibilities before us. French school. The gothic black cathedral I’d seen on Todd’s postcards from business trips. The flowers. The travel. The French countryside.

The job opening was in Clermont-Ferrand, a city four hours south of Paris. According to the tour books, Clermont-Ferrand was an uninteresting industrial town located in the region called the Auvergne, the lush agricultural heartland of France dotted with crumbling castles and sunflower fields. Some described the city as filled with smoke-spitting factories and car dealerships. One of Todd’s French colleagues rolled his eyes whenever Clermont was mentioned. “It’s a dirty place,” he said. But it sounded fascinating to me, such a mix of modern and medieval, with a thirteenth-century cathedral, a thermal spring, and the Michelin headquarters, all within a mile of each other. And on the horizon was the Puy de Dôme, an extinct volcano. Who needed Paris?

Would we live in the city? Most American expatriates lived together in one of the sleepy little villages on the outskirts of town. But I wasn’t interested in that. I wouldn’t want to move all the way to France to live right in the middle of a bunch of Americans. Still, the village sounded so quaint, with its bakery, butcher shop, vineyards, and town square. Couldn’t we find a village that was still unexplored? Todd said that it would all depend where there was a rental house available. But there I was,

picking out a village when we hadn't even decided on whether to move yet. I didn't want to rush my answer even though this was my long-lost dream.

Then Todd tempted me with food. He spoke of fresh cheeses, crusty baguettes, and big loaves of *pain de campagne*, country bread. Potatoes layered with cream and cheese, and coq au vin. Apricots, fresh from the tree, and *clafoutis*, a cherry flan, eaten warm. My mouth watered.

We said yes.

Within two weeks of our acceptance we were summoned to a meeting with personnel. In the parking lot, a sudden gust of wind blew my hair and fluttered the paper I carried for notes. A guard handed me a badge on a chain and I followed Todd through hallways and past mazes of cubicles. Finally we got to an office where a serious-looking woman sat across from a frightened couple. We joined them at the table, and she shut the door and handed me a three-inch-thick binder on expatriation. And then she talked at us for I don't know how long about French taxes, insurance, school for the children, bank accounts, how our lamps would work but our televisions would not, percentages of pay in dollars and in francs, housing costs, French lessons for spouses, the company's responsibility in case of accidental death, and how France has no closets. Two hours later, it was over. I looked down at my paper. It was blank.

Todd and I wandered out into the parking lot with our eyes spinning and struggled to find our car. We drove home and called our parents. I just knew Mother and Daddy would be thrilled for us, as much as they loved to travel. "Oh," Mother said, with a quiver in her voice. "Well," she said, "I'll call my friends at church. You'll have to be our new foreign missions project."

Daddy sounded serious. "I'm sure it will be good for Todd's career," he said, and then got off the phone and started planning a last-minute family trip to Florida, as if they might never see us again.

Next we called Todd's parents, and Todd's mom didn't hide her feelings. After considerable silence she said, "I guess I might as well curl up and die." I couldn't blame her. She had just gotten Todd's brother and his family back to the Carolinas after the air force had taken them off to Japan and then New Mexico. Now we were running off to another country with her youngest grandbaby, before Sam had even started reaching for her. Todd's dad, who had been in France with the army in the early sixties, said, "You've got to do what you've got to do," and started recalling how he used to see French men bicycling to work with wine in their baskets and baguettes under their arms.

Within three months that breeze in the parking lot had grown into a full-blown twister. Paperwork of every kind blew around us like confetti, though we tried to rein it in. I walked around the house for a week with a clipboard, writing down the required inventory of our every possession, from boys' briefs to salad forks, complete with a translation in French and estimated replacement value in dollars and in francs, just in

case the boat sank. We sold our house, closed bank accounts, were photographed and medically examined, went to French class, got a visa for the cat, and said goodbye to everyone we knew at least a couple times.

• • •

FINALLY, WE LUGGED our suitcases to the airport.

Ahead of us was the very last obstacle, a three-flight marathon; first to Atlanta, then to Paris, then south to Clermont-Ferrand.

Flying to France with three children, an old cat, nine suitcases, four backpacks, a diaper bag, a car seat, and a stroller turned out not to be nearly the nightmare I expected. Sarah busied herself by making up sad songs about lost nine-year-old ponies who would never see Greer, South Carolina, and their little yellow house again. Ben spent his time by drawing pictures of the cargo ship carrying all of our worldly possessions tragically sunken at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Thankfully, baby Sam slept most of the way and Katie the cat was strung out on kitty Valium in the cargo hold. Todd and I took turns at being comatose and giddy, celebrating that our move to France was finally happening. If we had forgotten any essential detail, it was too late now.

As Todd snored at the other end of the aisle, I asked the cute Air France steward for a drink.

“So you are taking your children to visit France?” he asked in his charming accent, searching his cart for a Coca Light.

“Oh, no,” I gushed. “We’re moving there. Today!”

“Ah. How nice for you,” he said. “Americans do love Paris.”

“Oh, we’re not moving to Paris,” I said, smiling. “We’re moving to Clermont-Ferrand.”

“*Pardon?*”

“Clermont-Ferrand,” I repeated with some throat scraping, trying to sound more French. “We have a connecting flight in Paris to Clermont-Ferrand.”

“Oh, Clermont-Ferrand,” he said, and grimaced. “For Michelin, no?” he asked, pointing at my husband drooling on his little pillow.

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Ah, madame, why else would anyone go to Clermont?” He handed me my glass. “It’s not Paris,” he said, frowning. “But maybe you will like it.”

## 2. *Le Début*



We landed in Oz.

There were volcanoes on the horizon—volcanoes, for heaven’s sake, not jagged and rocky but smooth and green, weathered into mounds and mountains, one sunken at the top like an egg cup for the moon. There were farm fields in the distance, dotted with little stone buildings roofed in orange tile, and tall, blackish cedars spiking into the purple blue sky. And there were thousands of sunflowers, tight green balls, flanking the roads as if standing offstage, waiting for their cue to raise their heads and burst into bloom.

Inside the air-locked plane we had braced ourselves to be hit by the steamy July heat we knew by heart, but this air was oddly cool and dry, as if puffed into the scene like a special effect. What was this place? Even the people in baggage claim had seemed strange—the woman so boyishly thin yet so outlandishly sensual, with her dark eyes and her silk chemise unbuttoned down to there. She moved in such a sultry way, whispering ordinary things to the businessmen as they stood by the conveyer belt and smoked.

The French people had greeted each other with smiles and kisses on both cheeks, taking each other’s bags and talking quietly. I stood and watched from the middle of our pile of stuff while Todd hoisted our heavy bags off the belt and the children flitted around him, getting in the way. We were making a scene, but no one seemed to notice. One by one the French left us. Huddled there alone within the glass partitions of baggage claim, we looked like an exhibit at the zoo.

Someone was supposed to meet us there. The lady in personnel had said that someone, maybe even a family with children of similar ages to ours, would be assigned to meet us at the airport, to welcome us and escort us to the furnished apartment where we’d stay until our things arrived. Americans are always assigned to Americans, she had said, as they would know better than the French what their fellow countrymen would need when they were jet lagged and hungry. But no one came.

I didn’t mind—I liked the idea of the five of us seeing Clermont-Ferrand for the first time alone, arm in arm on our yellow brick road, without anyone else to color our opinions or explain how our life here would be. I had talked with a few American expatriates back in South Carolina, and most were malcontents. Not me. This was

going to be the big adventure of my life—of my family’s life.

“Somebody will show up,” Todd said, leaning on the luggage cart. “They have to—they’ve got our keys.”

Finally the conveyer belt turned off and we found a bench of plastic seats to sit in while Todd went to report two missing bags. Sam, tired of sitting in his stroller, fussed and fidgeted. Ben was setting up the suitcases like dominoes and Sarah was whining to take Katie out for a second when Todd called out “Catch!” from behind.

He swung a heavy ring of keys up in a fake throw. There had to be twenty keys on the ring—paper-thin keys less than an inch long and heavy old keys with a single tooth that looked like they belonged in a chateau.

“You won’t believe it, but this envelope was just setting up there on the counter with my name on it. It’s a good thing we had two bags missing or I wouldn’t have even seen it.”

Sarah, intrigued by keys and envelopes that magically appear, whispered, “How do you think it got there?”

“Mrs. Thompson brought it, Sarah,” Todd said plainly. “You know Beck, Dan’s wife, Nora—I worked with Dan back in Research and Development. She must have dropped it off earlier,” he said. “She left a note that something came up but she’d call later. There’s a map—see, here’s the airport and here’s where we’re going to be, and there’s this,” he said, pulling out a blue elastic-bound folder labeled “PAPERS VERY IMPORTANTE,” and a small paperback titled *La code de la route*, with French traffic signs all over the cover.

“You want to look this over? Before we, uh...” I hesitantly asked my husband as he stuffed Sam into the car seat between Ben and Sarah in the back of our small rental car. Todd shook his head.

“Don’t need to. There are only a few signs I’m not sure about. I’ll just follow him,” he said, nodding at the taxi driver, who had loaded eight of our suitcases into his car and was gunning his engine. “No problem.”

### 3. *Rue des Bosquets*



We almost died. At least I thought we were going to.

It was Mr. Toad's Wild Ride into the city of Clermont-Ferrand and all the way to number 18, rue des Bosquets, Michelin's furnished duplex, where we would live until we found a rental house of our own. Todd followed close to the taxi driver, who jerked from lane to lane as motorbikes wove in front of us and behind, and bus only lanes and stoplights and roundabouts popped out of nowhere. Merging into the circle of spinning cars was like throwing ourselves into a life-and-death round of jump rope. I sat in the front with Katie's carrier on my lap, my heart slinging from side to side and dropping down into my shoes, trying to keep our place on the map in case the taxi sped on ahead. On long straight roads I stole glances at the view whizzing past the windows. There were ugly Laundromats next to charming stacked-stone houses with turrets and window boxes. There were cafés with tables outside crowded with people in sunglasses having tiny cups of coffee. Every building was roofed in ripples of orange tile, and most had quirky features like carved faces or molding or art deco borders of stone. There were restaurants, patisseries, and an Easy Rider L'École de la Moto. Even though the city looked like it was in need of a good power washing, it was stunning. Even the streetlights had baskets of flowers hanging from them, heavy with pink and red blooms.

People were everywhere—thin, tan people with summer clothes on. They were walking, some with dogs, some with children and funny strollers with attached umbrellas propped askew and with running boards where bigger children could stand and have their mother push them too. There were women in aprons sweeping their front steps or opening their shutters upstairs. And there were women with red hair, purple-red hair, and pink hair. People waited for buses and sat on benches, reading the paper or staring into space. There were revolving billboards and half-demolished buildings, one with the kitchen wall exposed to the world, still with the tile backsplash stuck on.

We strained our necks to see the Michelin headquarters. It was right in downtown Clermont-Ferrand. We hung a right and there on the hill was the huge black cathedral with its gothic spires. The city center was crowded with people walking and shopping at stores like Betty Boots, with its racks of shoes brought out onto the sidewalk. There were bakeries on every corner, and people carrying baguettes—unwrapped—in their bare hands. We turned onto rue Lavoisier and a diesel cloud blew into our car through