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Children of Rose Rock

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Children of Rose Rock

Amandine Fromont

A mes parents
A ma sœur
A une enfance à l'étranger

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The Rose Inheritance

“They say that Marie-Rose was the first one to set foot on the rocky shores of Mont Desert Island as she led the survivors of the ship wreck out of the sea, like some beardless, French-speaking, violin-toting Moses guiding her people into Canaan. Anyone in Rose Rock will tell you so. Of course, it is an exaggeration.

Granted, some themes sound familiar: there is persecution, seas to cross, loss and fear, with the ultimate salvation of the Promised Land. Very prophet-like. It is thus unsurprising that the story grew in the town’s popular myth until Marie-Rose appeared as some sort of messiah, guiding the Huguenots to freedom.

But I am more interested in unveiling the woman behind my ancestor’s legend.”

- Rosemary Mounier-Pringent, Rose Rock: Tales, Troubles and Tradition

“Up, Rosie!” Maman chanted, hands on her hips as clear eyes surveyed the form huddled beneath the white blanket. “Yann is already getting ready. You’ll be late for your morning quiz.”

As always, Rosemary wondered how her mom, already dressed for orchestra practice in a neat jacket and a long skirt, could have possibly known about the first period Biology quiz. Super-spy skills must come with her role as a mother.

Bérénice-Rose Mounier-Pringent liked perfection. She walked around with a dancer’s posture, gained with the habit of always being on stage. When she played the violin, her body swayed and bent like a weeping willow, dropping heart-breaking doves

of music that took flight until the wind of a flute or oboe brought it back to join the stream of entwining melodies.

Maman was a classically trained violinist. She was the best. She expected the best. Maman didn't kid around.

Maman was an artist, in the purest sense of the word. Her mind made strange leaps, discovering connections where there should not have been. Not to say she was absent-minded, on the contrary. She was shrewd and razor-sharp. And, as such, she expected everyone else to be, too.

Rosemary thought at times it was a miracle that someone as calm and laidback as her French Breton father could have married her mom. But they both loved music. Barthélémy Pringent might have been an engineer, but his heart belonged to the melodies, the harmonies and the warm camaraderie of band playing. His folk band performed every year at the island folk festival, and every Friday night at Rose Rock Café, playing classic favorites, new compositions, and crowd requests. For an easygoing guy, it was scary how much fierce dedication he put to learning new songs. He whistled in the mornings when he shaved, sang in the kitchen and the shower, and plucked his bass or Celtic fiddle at night.

Rosemary nodded and waited until her mom stepped out to get up, still trembling from the knowledge of what she had just done.

Her wandering eyes fell on her backpack, where the head of a violin case peeked out. After a brief struggle, she gave in to the temptation. Locking her door, she opened the case and pulled the precious instrument awake, amazed at her own recklessness. Sure, she had gotten to touch it before, at birthdays and holidays. But this was so much better.

Polished and poised, the plain maple of the violin's body rested on a plush, purple velvet no longer soft to touch. The ebony fingerboard stretched its pegs and scroll like an arm out of bed. Though it looked simple enough, it was infinitely more precious than most people would believe.

Marie-Rose's violin. She had just stolen Marie-Rose's violin from right under her mother's nose.

According to Rose Rock's legend, it had come all the way from seventeenth century France, in the baggage of Marie-Rose Mounier, a persecuted protestant musician, whose ship, fleeing France's revocation of the Edit de Nantes, had been shoved off its course to Québec by a monster storm, and wrecked on the rocky shores of old Massachusetts, now Maine. Rose, Maman liked to remind her, was the founder of Rose Rock, a model of resilience and musicianship.

Rosemary loved that tale. When she was little, she had spent hours playing make-believe in the shadow of the garden's oaks, re-staging the shipwreck and writing fake travel logs about life at sea.

Then, in sixth grade, using the excuse of a class presentation, she had spent weeks haunting the tall, dusty shelves of the town archives to ferret out more information, taking notes on all her findings. There were original hand-drawn maps of what was to become Rose Rock that the head librarian had refused to let her touch, journals and memoirs, letters from France, merchant inventories, and even the very first written use of the local curse "Shipwreck!" in a woman's prayer book. She had especially liked reading the log of the ship, the *Neptune*, in which Marie-Rose was described as a free spirit with her smile and her violin.

Here was someone, Rosemary believed, who was worthy to be revered. Not that she would ever admit it to anyone. But in her daily journal, where she gathered an array of discoveries, thought and lists of things she liked, she addressed all her entries to her. “Chère Marie-Rose.” Though she knew that they would never meet, it felt good to write her letters.

This tale was tied to the violin. The tale, and the tradition. There was the rub. In the tradition, her violin had always gone to the most talented young violinist of her musician descendants. And it had always happened that her violin had gone to girls. Rosemary was in the right: she was a girl, she was a passionate musician (with a family like hers, you had to); but she wasn’t great.

She wasn’t even close to great. For an average family, she was good. But for hers, she was decent at best. That knowledge scraped at her insides every minute of every day, rubbing her raw and salting years of open wounds, like the Christmas concerts at Mamie Mounier’s, when her uncles and cousins and parents and grandparents all played as a familial orchestra and she had to fake reading the music as they sped along. One year they had asked the grandkids to perform solos, and she had had to babble tearfully about a lifelong non-existent case of stage fright to avoid the embarrassment of playing after Aunt Anne-Marie’s young twins, piano genius Enid and brilliant clarinet Eric.

And those Friday nights, when Papa’s folk band played songs on request at Rose Rock Café, and he invited Yann, her younger brother, and her on stage, and she had to make a quick escape to the bathroom to avoid showing that, unlike them, she couldn’t play anything without practicing it for weeks first.

She had even prayed to Marie-Rose in middle school, begging her night after night to share her musical gift so she wouldn't be ashamed of playing in front of her family. Mamie Mounier's 60th birthday had been the worst, when she had messed up the grandkids' performance by losing rhythm and making everyone fumble. Mamie had complained. Maman had said nothing, only given her an I-expected-better-from-you stare as Rosemary apologized again and again. She had stopped playing.

They didn't do it on purpose, she knew. They didn't mean to shame her. But her family picked up music so naturally that, to them, her difficulties were incomprehensible. In retrospect, she should feel guilty about the theft, she supposed.

She didn't.

Rosemary nestled the instrument between her chin and shoulder, feeling beneath her fingers the intricate swirls and stylized vines carved along the backboard. Cradling the violin between her chin and neck in an embrace more familiar than sleep, she took a deep breath. So this was what it felt like to hold it. In awe, she closed her eyes, half-hoping a greater ancestral spirit would take over and coax some far-fetched and fluid melody out of the ancient instrument.

Of course, it didn't.

She sighed. You would think she would know by now that the music was not magically tied to the violin. After all, Maman had stopped using it in favor of a violin of more modern design after getting into the Portland Orchestra, and she was still the best violinist in Maine.

With careful gestures, Rosemary put the violin away. All she had to do was keep it hidden. If she planned it well, only her journal would ever know about her early

morning theft. Ancestors help her but she would win her place in the family if it killed her.

She only had three weeks after all. Nearing the calendar pinned on her blue seashell-patterned wall, Rosemary counted. Twenty-one little squares.

Twenty-one days. It was her fault, really. She had wanted to prove herself at this recital, to show them the violin belonged with her. No one had forced her. Well, not directly.

Mrs. Pernet had definitely started it all, looking at her with her cocker-spaniel eyes as she brought up the upcoming performance, emphasizing how fun it might be for her to play. No, Mrs. Pernet, playing in front of half her high school was not fun. There was a reason she had avoided it throughout her short, studious career. But her plump violin teacher had looked surprisingly stern, highlighting how many recitals she had already missed and how that damaged her live performance practice, and just think, Rosemary, think how proud your parents would be to hear you play! In the end, she had agreed to think about it.

Then, orchestra practice that afternoon had thrown a few more arguments her way. The short maestro was excited about the recital (well, he was always excited about everything), emphasizing how important it was if they hoped to get any orchestra solos this year, bounding around the room and waving his baton around in a frenzy, white hairs sticking out around his head until everyone had to hide their grins. After taking a few laps around the room, his energy had simmered down enough for him to ask who would be participating.

In the end, of course, her younger brother had been the deciding factor. As a freshman, he couldn't perform yet, but his teasing look as she hesitated while hands went up around the orchestra room had, as it usually did, made her suddenly itch to punch him. Since he was too far to do so discreetly, she had raised her fist instead. That would show him.

So, really, now that she thought about it, this whole mess was Yann's fault.

And here she was, with these three weeks staring her in the face from the calendar page, practicing a piece she was praying would sound good. But it would. It had to. Besides, she had the violin now. Rosemary rubbed her arms to chase away a sudden shiver.

“Breakfast!”

Rosemary tied up her honey hair in a ponytail, jotted down the events of the morning in her journal, and grabbed her biology notebook. Closing the door, she headed down the sunset-colored hallway. She may be a family failure at music, but she refused to be a school failure if she could help it. Turning past her brother's room and down the staircase, she reached the kitchen, bright with morning light filtering through south-facing windows.

The notebook found a stand propped against the milk carton. Following along with the back of her spoon to avoid stamping the paper with butter stains, she read over her notes about flowering plants' reproduction.

“Go' morning everyone!”

Papa strolled into the kitchen, shirt un-tucked and socks mismatched, blue eyes bright behind rectangular glasses.

An unintelligible grunt emerged from her right, where Yann, having folded his growing frame into a chair, replied to Papa while simultaneously trying to fit a full slice of bread with raspberry jam into his mouth. After struggling with it for a while, he managed to swallow it all down, and attacked a new slice with almost indecent enthusiasm, eyes exactly like their father's sparkling beneath his brown hair.

Since her younger brother had gotten his new motorbike, he drove them to school every morning. They might have had time for proper breakfast, but she often thought his increase in arrogance wasn't worth the extra toast.

Yann hadn't always been that bad. Sure he could be annoying, not to mention he had a disturbing and quasi-religious appreciation of gravy-drinking contests and soccer, but they used to have fun together. They had built tree-houses and had bike races, and cooked up weird concoctions in the old pan that almost set the house on fire; he had let her dress him up like a doll and learned to sew, and she had practiced swimming with him in the public pool when he was too scared to swim in the sea; they were almost friends.

But that was before he'd shown more than a passing interest for family tradition. Before he'd realized that he could easily learn any instrument he found and became the orchestra maestro's new favorite. Before he'd decided he wanted to be a musician.

Now, an insurmountable chasm grew between them, a constant whisper at the back of her mind that they were competing, that it wasn't fun and games anymore. He was insufferable now, a knight wrapped in the shining armor of his pride, and she closed

herself off, retreating behind her turrets to a dungeon from where she might better see the enemy arrive. It was a silent and unforgiving war.

She was in the right, of course. She was a girl. She was a violinist. The problem was, she wasn't the best. And that terrified her.

The ride to school was nerve-wracking. Rosemary winced at every bump in the road, worrying about the violin in her backpack. She considered asking Yann to slow down, but realizing it might give her away, ended up keeping silent. When they finally got to school, she jumped off, cradling the bag in her arms, and ran to check if it was safe. Thankfully, no new scratch marred the wood, and she slipped it in her locker with a sigh of relief.

In comparison, the Biology quiz was uneventful. She should have known not to memorize all of the extra chapter definitions, but it felt good to have snuck one or two in her responses to the long answer questions. Maybe Mr. Marcus, her bald, Mr. Clean-looking biology teacher, would give her bonus points for it. After a deathly boring Calculus class, she finally got to French Literature. Her favorite.

To begin, Ms. LaViolette, petite, blonde and as fragile-looking as the flower whose name she took, handed back the previous week's graded essays. Rosemary awaited hers with anticipation. She had loved the topic: inventing the end of a short story. But when she received it and eagerly turned to the last page to find her grade, all she found was "See me after class" imprinted on the page in crimson ink. A fissure of dread tore through her stomach, soon ripping open a pit of despair. She had gotten it completely wrong. She was a failure at Literature, too. The one subject at which she excelled.

Colored by her growing worry, the class seemed to drag on and on. Despite the introduction of the new author they would be studying, Marguerite Yourcenar, the first woman to enter the French Academy of Writers, and her novel *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, Rosemary did not manage to share the teacher's enthusiasm. All she could think about was those four bloody words screaming at her from her paper.

When the bell rang at last, she jumped out of her seat, tossed everything into her bag, and rushed to the teacher's desk, panicked and eager to learn how she had failed.

Ms. LaViolette took her time, waving at the other students as they filed out of the room, putting away the book, tucking away strands of her soft blonde hair, and re-organizing her folders with small, meticulous gestures. When she finally looked up, she smiled her dimpled grin, and bade her sit.

When, fingers knotted like a ball of yarn to prevent them from trembling, Rosemary let herself slip onto the nearest chair, her teacher finally began to speak: "To start, Rosemary, I want you to know that this is one of the best pieces of writing I've seen in..."

But Rose stopped listening. She wasn't failing? The knot of her fingers slowly began untangling itself.

"...great opportunity for you, and of course I could provide any help you might need..."

"I'm sorry," she interrupted, feeling silly, "what opportunity?"

"This creative writing contest!" Ms. LaViolette pushed the brightly colored pamphlet she was holding under Rosemary's nose. "It's only island-wide, but it would be

a great way to stretch your writer's wings, and just think!" she exclaimed, waving the pamphlet like some tormented flag, "the winner gets published in the newspaper!"

Rosemary lost the rest of the enthused speech as her teacher flapped her hands in a decidedly bird-like fashion. After a while, still dazed by this twist of fate, she nodded to her teacher's supplications that she try and stuffed the pamphlet in her bag. Stepping out of the classroom, however, she realized with a return of the previous dread that if she wanted to be a true child of Marie-Rose, she could not afford to waste time on the contest. She had to focus on outperforming her musically gifted brother.

She had three weeks. The contest had to wait.

Getting to violin practice that afternoon, she pulled out her stack of sheet music with *Le Cygne*, the piece from Camille Saint-Saens' *Animal Carnival* that she would be performing, on top. Then, with mingled dread and delight, she reached into her bag and brought out the violin case.

"A new violin, dear?"

Mrs. Pernet's voice made her jump. Turning quickly, she forced a smile on her lips.

"Umm...yes, Mrs. Pernet. I thought it, umm, would be more appropriate for the recital."

The middle-aged woman closed the door and approached. Handling the violin with delicate fingers, she examined it as Rosemary waited, holding her breath. Her teacher wouldn't, couldn't recognize it. Maman hadn't used it in public for ages. It was

fine. After a moment, Mrs. Pernet clucked and handed it back to her. “Yes, yes, it’s lovely. A bit antiquated but as long as it’s in tune, it should be just fine, eh?”

Reaching her bag perched on the piano bench, she pulled out a piece of rosin and started polishing the horsehairs on her own bow.

“Now, have you warmed up yet?”

Rosemary lifted the violin to her chin. Despite her anxiety, she couldn’t relinquish the thrill of playing on the same instrument as her ancestor. Deep breath. Warm up was easy. A chromatic scale first. All the way up, then all the way down, staccato, then legato. Marie-Rose’s violin, *her* violin, vibrated under her fingers like the fur of a purring cat. The warm-up was so familiar she could have sung it, had she had any voice.

She only got two flats wrong. That wasn’t a bad start. Emboldened by the small success and by Mrs. Pernet’s nod of approval, she moved on to regular scales, holding the bow more firmly. Third scale in, however, she missed a sharp and had to start again.

Just an F#, come on, keep in rhythm, oops no, wait do it again, why can’t I get this right?

“Why don’t you write in the sharp, dear?”

After a few more trying tries and sad coos from Mrs. Pernet, she moved on with relief to D major, Le Cygne’s scale. Just go up then back down, it’s easy, relax. A false note screeched out, and she winced. This should be easy. Yann played it like it was easy. So why couldn’t *she* get this right? Was she stupid?

“Rosemary,” cautioned Mrs. Pernet as she paused, feeling clumsy and hopeless, “you’re doing fine. Just take a deep breath and start again.”

She waited until her hands were no longer trembling, polished the horsehairs with rosin, and slowly, steadily, stubbornly brought the violin back to her chin.

Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

It's going to be okay.

Deep breath.

D major.

The writing contest pamphlet lay crumpled at the bottom of her bag, all but forgotten.

“You asked me about character. In general people act on two main things: background and drive. Any writer worth his salt will tell you that. The thing is, there is always something driving people, whether it's passion, fear, anger, or desperation. It's one of the key things about our human nature. So before trying to define anyone, you have to figure out what pushes them to do what they do.”

- Rosemary Mounier-Pringent, in a guest lecture at NYU

“That was much better, dear.”

“Really? You...you think so?”

“Yes! You know, why don't you play the full piece once for me? Like you're at the recital. Just to get yourself in the mindset?”

Something in Rosemary's face must have betrayed her anxiety, because Mrs. Pernet gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder. “Why don't you stand here, by the

piano...move your stand now...good. And I'll sit by the door as the audience. You'll do fine, you just need to grow some confidence. That's why we're practicing, right?"

With a nod, Rosemary turned toward the piece. She'd been practicing every day with Mrs. Pernet for the past week. All the sharps were written out, so they couldn't trip her. It was fine, just fine. Yeah.

The bow rose and came to a rest on the first string. She took a deep breath. Just don't think about the audience. Painfully aware that Mrs. Pernet was waiting for her to start, she gripped the neck tighter, fingers trembling.

D, C#, F#.

B, A, D.

Think ahead, what was the next note? Which one was it? An F? Or maybe the G? No, no, the E, it was the E, then F# and G.

Flustered, she didn't stop (she had retained that much about performance), but she imagined disappointment emanating from the blurred figure seated at the edge of her vision until she was red with shame, and even the violin felt foreign. She was a criminal, butchering Saint-Saens' masterpiece until only a handful of broken notes remained. When, at last, the final D resonated in the room, she lowered her instrument. "It was horrible, wasn't it?" she asked in a dead voice. A tear ran down her cheek, unnoticed.

"Now, dear..." Mrs. Pernet rushed up to her, pulling out a tissue. "There now, there's no need to cry, it went well, you just had a bit of stage fright and got all nervous and..."

Rosemary heard without listening as the soothing chatter of her teacher washed over her. Seven days of practice, and that was all she had to show. Barely any better than her first day. What a failure.

“Rosemary? Are you listening, dear?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry Mrs. Pernet. I just...”

Mrs. Pernet watched her with a surprisingly severe look in her brown puppy eyes.

“Yes, yes, I know very well what you’re doing.”

“You do?” she asked, snapped out of her glum state by the unexpected twist.

“Oh yes!” Mrs. Pernet’ bob of hair bounced decidedly as she placed her hands on her hips. “You’re putting too much pressure on yourself, my girl! It’s only been a week and you’re already expecting perfection! I assure you, it takes more practice than that to learn a piece like *Le Cygne* on violin. I expect you to know that! Now, I want no more of this defeatist attitude, do you hear? You’re doing just fine.” With a firm nod, she indicated the sheet of music on the stand. “From the top.”

But as she started to play again under her teacher’s careful eye, heartened in spite of herself, Rosemary couldn’t silence the little voice in her head whispering that Yann could have mastered it on the first day.

One week. She had one week left.

Maybe she had picked too complicated a piece? Maybe she should have chosen ...no, this was okay. No one in her family would have backed away from a difficult piece. So she wouldn’t either. Besides, there was no time to change now.

Rosemary wondered if something was wrong with her. How was it that everyone in her family could play so beautifully, when she struggled with barely complex songs? Maybe, at some fundamental level, something had been broken when she was little. The saying around town was that the Marie-Rose children were all born with music in their blood and rhythm in their feet. So what was she?

Right now, she might very well be a practical joke played on her family. Her most recurrent nightmare involved being tossed in a circus arena, surrounded by crowds of flashing smiles and glittering mockery who came from all over the world to listen to her mix up her majors and minors. Under the ringleader's commentary, they howled in glee when she mistook a note for another, cheered for every misstep, and screeched when the bow broke under the accumulation of her false notes. She was finally famous, sneered her brother in the background: the first disgustingly embarrassing musician of Marie-Rose's descendants.

That was when she jerked awake, heart pounding and skin streaked with sweat, and ran to the bathroom to gag and pour cold water on her face. Sometimes she just turned on the shower, and stood silently under the jet of freezing water until the nightmares clinging to her skin dissolved. Turning the knob to shut off the water, she would feel her resolution strengthen. She would *not* be a disappointment. Anything but that. Anything.

On the Tuesday before the recital, autumn hit, hard and sudden, ripping barely reddened leaves off the skeletal branches of the backyard trees with a gust of wind from Canada. Engorged clouds steadily emptied themselves of cold, biting mist as their dark

donkey-bellied greys dripped into the wet asphalt of the roads and corroded moods into rusty iron.

Staring through her bedroom window, Rosemary experienced a rare moment of peace. It was stunning, the rain and the leaves mingling as they fell. Their movements as they tossed around in the wind could have been a waltz. A waltz... Pulling out her notebook, she began a list entitled Autumn Things:

Raindrops racing each other down the windowpane. You try to follow one with your finger, encouraging it down and hoping it will beat its sisters, while knowing the whole time that they are not competing.

Pulling out the first sweaters and scarves. Colored leaves waltzing hand in hand along the columns of air rising in small tornadoes. Approaching holidays. New books whose ink stains your fingers when you turn the page.

An itch to travel when the cold wind blows. The warm, humid smell of fall fills you until you want to fly far away, accompanying the geese whose honks echo in your ears. Despite how much you love home, the urge grows to migrate South.

A few notes from a slow jazz saxophone growling out of a café when you walk by. The prologue to A Winter's Tale. Squash soup. Rain slipping into your boots and soaking your socks when you walk.

A slamming door jolted her out of focus, and she shut the notebook closed as Yann raced in.

“Hey! Have you ever heard of knocking?” she started.

But Yann cut her off, a strange look on his face: “Have you seen the violin?”

“What?” Cold beads of sweat began to form at the nape of her neck.

“Marie-Rose’s violin. I went downstairs to... anyway, it’s gone. Have you seen it?”

“N-no.” Darn the hesitation in her voice! “I haven’t been down there in weeks. How should I know where it is?” she added, trying to put confident annoyance in her voice.

On anyone else, it would have passed. Even her shrewd mother would not have questioned it. But this was Yann. She knew when he narrowed his eyes that she was done for.

“Oh shipwreck,” he cursed in a low voice, “you took it, didn’t you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I never...”

“You did! You took it!”

Looking at her now, a mocking gleam shone in his eye, the kind that usually meant he had found a new way to make her life miserable. In this case, he had.

“Just wait ‘til I tell Maman.”

“Don’t you dare!” she whispered ferociously. “Okay, fine, I have it, but I just need it for a few days and then I’m putting it back! It’s not a big deal!”

That wasn’t a complete lie, she told herself, just a slight untruth. But Yann was on little-brother-at-his-worst mode now.

“So what do you need it for? Are you showing it off or something? Oh, or trying to use it? That’s just pathetic. You know it’s going to be mine, Rosie,” he smirked, pushing brown hair out of his eyes.

Digging her nails into her palms to prevent herself from screaming at him, which would have immediately brought her parents running, she gave him a death glare that he barely noticed, too excited about his discovery.

“Shut up, you leech.”

“I can’t wait for you to explain to Maman how it got damaged,” he pushed on with relish, “because, you know, it’s just not used to bad players.”

“Get out.” Standing, she grabbed his shirt and shoved him toward the door.

“And if you tell,” she whispered coldly, “I’ll tell Maman about your F in math.”

The door slammed shut. He was wrong, she thought fiercely, pacing along the length of her blue-trimmed carpet. He had it all wrong.

D-Day.

In the early morning, skipping breakfast, Rosemary ran all the way to school to get in extra rehearsing time.

Still gasping for breath, going over her scales, she tried to convince herself she would be fine. Mrs. Pernet had been saying that she was doing a lot better.

A plain F resonated in the practice room, and she growled. She kept forgetting that sharp! A soft cough interrupted her and she spun, spotting her brother’s lanky frame leaning through the doorway.

Shipwreck. She hadn’t thought he would wake up so early. Or that he would follow her. “What do you want?” It came out more aggressive than she had intended, but felt good as it rolled off her tongue like poison out of a wound.

“You should hold the bow more lightly,” came the quiet reply. “It would make the fast passages easier.”

The unexpected suggestion unsettled her prepared invective, and she turned back to the piece to give herself countenance.

“Why do you push yourself so hard?” His voice rose as she hit yet another shrieking false note and closed her eyes in desperation. “It’s okay to be less good at violin, you know.” Still in that gently soothing voice and he took a few steps toward her. Why was he trying to console her? She was fine. Just fine. Wasn’t it obvious? “You have other strengths. You’re so smart. You could be anything you want...”

“I want to be a musician!” she growled back, her voice squeaking into a higher pitch on the last syllables.

“Come on, Rosie...Maman wants you to be a musician. But we both know you’re better at other things. Listen...”

The dam holding the torrent of her emotions burst, violent, brusque, devastating. “No, you listen! You don’t know what it’s like, trying to keep up with everyone. I know I can never be as good as her, or you, or Papa. But if I get the violin, they’ll have to recognize I’m a part of the family too. I just have to work hard enough, be good enough...”

“Oh, Rosie...”

Glaring at him, she was shocked to find compassion, even pity, in his eyes. She had thought he only ever felt contempt and loathing for her nowadays. That was how she felt.

“Rosemary, listen, the violin goes to the best violinist. You know that’s not you. What are you trying to prove? That you belong? But Rosie, you already do...”

As he moved forward, hands outstretched, panic rose within her. Part of her mind registered his mature kindness and was deeply touched. But it was easier, a nasty voice growled, so much easier to see him as an enemy, because she knew she wasn’t good, but she had to have it, she needed it, the violin, it was hers, hers by right, her inheritance, how could no one see that? It was the only thing that still made her a part of the family, the only thing that would redeem her shame. How could he ever understand that, he the perfect musician?

“Rosie, please, they still love you, it doesn’t matter how you play. Please...”

“Just go away! You think I don’t know what you’re doing? You’re trying to trick me into giving it up! But you won’t get it, this violin is mine, do you hear? It has to be, it needs to be, I deserve it! It’s mine, mine, MINE!”

Yann seemed to stand taller as his sea blue eyes darkened to a maelstrom. Outstretched hands fell back by his sides and clenched into fists. “You’re so stupid,” he snarled, in a voice so low she barely caught his words. “Don’t you realize no matter how you practice, you’re still bad? That’s a definition of crazy right there. The result won’t change no matter what you do. Just give up.”

“I won’t!” Arguing was a familiar terrain. “I might be crazy, but at least I’ve worked hard for what I have! When have you ever made an effort for music? It’s always so easy for you, and that’s just unfair!”

He looked astounded, tottering back a few steps, but narrowed his eyes. “I’ve had to live up to your grades in every class I ever took,” he stated coldly, taking her by

surprise. “Since the beginning of the year, I’ve had to listen to teachers tell me how smart you are and how lucky I am to have a sister like you. Music is the only thing I’m really good at. Why can’t you let me have it?”

He stalked out of the room, fists clenched and back rigid. Instead of the triumph she expected, her sudden fury ebbed away, dragging with it the feverish frenzy that had possessed her. Sitting down, she cradled the violin like a child, dimly aware that the bell had started to ring.

Rosemary walked through her classes in a daze, mentally going over every note of the piece to ensure she knew them all. Legato on the first three, then in the next trio don’t forget the F#...She had forgotten about the reading for French Literature, but couldn’t bring herself to care. Instead of the questions she had to answer, her eyes visualized the violin fingering, repeating each note over and over again.

After class, Mrs. Pernet, seeing her blinded look, grabbed her by the shoulders and reminded her sternly not to panic: “Worrying now won’t help one bit, I’m telling you. Now, why don’t you get something to eat? You can’t play on an empty stomach.” Fussing, she pestered Rosemary into ingesting a few bites of quiche and a cookie.

Finally, the recital came.

As the first performers played piano, cello or saxophone, Rosemary mustered her courage. Fighting face on! She would be fine, she was Marie-Rose’s descendant. Just play the shipwrecking piece and show them what you can do, you just have to play it and you’ve won, come on, Rosie-girl! She would show them. She would show Yann.

Stepping onto the stage, she felt the weight of dozens of eyes in the attentive audience. Ignore them, she scolded internally. They don't matter. Well three of them do but...no just don't think about it. You're playing with *her* violin.

Lifting the instrument to her chin, Rosemary played the first note, satisfied to know, without even looking, that she had surprised her parents. Well she was about to surprise them more.

As she played, some distant part of her delighted in how well she stayed in rhythm. Most of her mind, however, remained focused on the piece, not daring to release its attention for a second at the risk of messing up. It came as a surprise, then, when she reached the last, ringing note. Suddenly, it was time to bow, and she blinked at the projecting lights.

With a sudden thrill, she realized it was done. She was free. Surely now everyone realized how good she was.

And she beamed.

After the concert, she put away the precious violin, and went to look for her parents. She found them clustered by the refreshments table, chatting with other musicians. Shy, she approached slowly before tapping Papa on the shoulder.

“Did...did you like it?”

He smiled at her fondly. “You did good, Rosie. That's one of my favorite pieces, you know.”

“Maman?”

“Not bad, ma chérie,” Maman nodded in approval, “but who exactly gave you permission to use that violin?”

Blushing furiously, Rosemary hid her embarrassment under a shoulder shrug. “I...I wanted to show you that I value the tradition. You know I love the violin, Maman.” Picking up momentum in reckless hope, she added breathlessly: “I’ll play it and treasure it for the rest of my life, you know I will, if you would only consider giving it to me now, you don’t play it very often after all and I love it, I need it.”

“Well now, Rosie...” began her mother with a frown.

But at that moment, a melody rose over the crowd, and as everyone turned in amazement, Rosemary’s world crashed down.

Because Yann had found the violin.

And he was playing her piece.

Anger? Despair? Resignation? What was that feeling taking over her? She had no words for it. It was painful, surprising but also accepting in a way. She should have known.

She should have known he would ruin it all for her.

In the car as they drove home, everyone remained eerily silent. Maman tapped her fingers on the armrest thoughtfully. Yann was still clutching the violin, her violin, as though he had already won.

In a way, Rosemary knew he had.

“Music is an art. By its very nature, it generates emotion. That is why we crave it. But there is some music that surpasses greatness, and transcends to an awakening of the

sublime, akin to watching the waves of the ocean rise in fury toward the teal-streaked clouds as pure, incandescent lightning strikes so that all is illuminated for a breath, bringing you down to your knees in mingled terror and awe. The “Ecstasy of Gold” by Enyo Morricone is one of such music. In that instant, my brother and the violin were another. As he played, I caught the stupefied look in my parents’ eyes, and I knew. They were not seeing him as they saw me, a child that parental duty said must be congratulated. No, they saw him as he truly was, a prodigy worthy of being venerated.”

- Rosemary Mounier-Pringent, Prose Paradise

Louis-Jo

The summer morning was already humid, the still air wrapping around people like a wet, sticky blanket. Steam rose from the harbor as fourteen-year old Antonin Henri made his way along the dock. It was going to be a hot day.

Putting down the many paper bags weighing down his arms, he shook out his hands, welcoming the blood rushing back into his fingers. Taking full advantage of the break, he wiped drops of sweat out of his eyes, readjusted his rectangular, wire-frame glasses and gazed out over the water.

Salvation Harbor stared right back at him, a long, narrow expanse of briny water polished to an eye-watering shine by the sun. Dozens of boats ranging from fishing dinghies to three-mast ships and schooners and even a few yachts were tied along the floating docks. The yachts, Antonin knew, did not belong to anyone in Rose Rock, but to a few wealthy tourists who toured the coastal islands in the summer and liked to stop by for food, festivals, or the “cultural experience” of one of the oldest French colonies of Maine.

Antonin snorted. The tourists who talked about “cultural experience” did not give a penny’s worth about the rich culture of Rose Rock. They just wanted to tell their friends they had been someplace exotic but still American (“right in Maine, I’m telling you!”) and show off their summer tan.

Antonin shared his father Jacques Henri’s love of history, especially that of Rose Rock. They accumulated town artifacts in The Treasure Trove, the family antique shop. While one could technically buy the objects on display, most people treated the Treasure

Trove like a town museum. Unwilling to make people pay to learn about their own history, Antonin's grandfather had instead converted the second room of the shop into a bar, thus ensuring profits. While Jacques Henri had inherited a few prized objects along with the shop, like the figurehead of the *Neptune*, the ship that had carried the founders over from France, most he had collected by combing the beach of Neptune Cove and scuba diving in the remains of the shipwreck. Old coins polished by the sand, the ship's anchor and chain, jewelry the women had fled with, the ship carpenter's toolbox...once cleaned, the rescued objects settled around the shop. Antonin was particularly proud of their work with the town's chronicle database, where they matched their discoveries with archives of what had been saved from the shipwreck.

In contrast, listening to tourists blab about their last shopping trip made him sick. Everything someone from Rose Rock did or said *meant* something. They played music, and wrote, and sailed, and sculpted, and talked with the same steady purpose. Antonin liked to think that this incredible drive was a legacy of the founders, a will to move forward and survive. All the while, these visitors were gushing about how good they looked posing in front of the "cute traditional houses". It made his teeth grind. Still, he tried to contain it. Tourists brought money.

He picked up his bags and began plodding along again. The ship he was headed for, *Amélie*, belonged to his uncle Julian, a retired sea captain with a booming laugh and a love of stories. Tired of leaving home, he now ran a local nautical school in the summer months, and organized cruises around the island.

It was one of these that Antonin was preparing for today. Although he had been reluctant to forego his usual summer job at The Treasure Trove, Uncle Julian had insisted

it would do a growing boy good to see some sun. Loading the ship with enough food and water for three days was a lot more effort than Antonin had originally thought. Keeping the boat clean was a chore, too, but the trips were fun. Besides, he got to hang out with his uncle. But the tourists he had to deal with on these trips...Antonin shook his head.

“Sorry...”

The soft voice startled him. Turning, he came face to face with an old man, shorter than him by a full head, sporting a bright yellow shirt, an equally yellow cap and large sunglasses. Antonin had never seen a stranger-looking figure.

“Excuse me there, but will you be taking her out today?” the old man asked, gesturing toward the ship.

Shaking his head, Antonin responded that she was docked for the weekend.

“We’re taking her out on Monday. I’m just getting her ready for her next trip.”

“Because I signed up for a sail, you see, and I wasn’t sure...” Twisting his hands, the old man continued, “Is she sailed by Rick?”

“No sir, she sails under my uncle, Captain Julian. He runs the Wind Rose nautical school on the island.”

The stranger’s face fell. “Oh,” he said with disappointment. “It’s just that Rick often moors nearby, and I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Captain Rick is off on a long trip, sir.” His mom and dad had discussed Rick Leberre, his friend Thomas’ dad, with concern a week ago. Eavesdropping, Antonin had gathered that Rick couldn’t travel as much as a captain should because of a difficult situation at home. He thought it must be because of Mrs. Leberre. Though Thomas never talked about it, the whole town knew there was a problem with his mom.

“I thought I might be on his sail. I live in Portland, but I come up every year, you see?”

Great, a tourist. Antonin glanced at the old man. He should have known from the alarming shade of yellow. No one in Rose Rock wore anything like that.

Before he could make his escape, however, the old man said: “I used to sail alone, but with other guys around, other boats, for safety. If anything happened I couldn’t exactly walk away now, could I?” he chuckled.

Antonin irritably shook his head. The bags were heavy, and he couldn’t have cared less about this geezer’s sailing story. It was probably about to turn into a boast about his new yacht or something. A strand of hair fell into his eye, and he blew it out of the way.

“But they told me I can’t sail alone anymore. That when you’re 90 years old you’re bound to make a mistake.”

Antonin froze. This guy was *ninety* and he still sailed?

“But I’ve been sailing all my life. I like to speed, you know? I race with other boats, sometimes up to 100 mph. They called me The Legend, you know,” he added with a hint of pride, “because I was 89 and still speeding with the best of them. Even the doc couldn’t stop me. But last year I had to stop.”

He paused to look furtively around the deserted dock, water glinting in the reflection of his sunglasses, and leaned forward. Antonin put his bags down and bent toward him, so that their heads almost touched like two conspirators.

“Last year,” whispered the ninety-year old, “I was out on my boat, speeding fast, and I got a problem. Something jammed. So I had to stop and go down into the cockpit

(you know what the cockpit is, right?). I figured out what it was, and tinkered around to fix it, when suddenly the boat rocked. The closing hatch snapped down and hit me in the head, so hard I should have been knocked out, right there, see?”

He took off his cap to expose silvery hair and a balding head, and patted the speckled top of his forehead. A faded purple bruise marked the pale skin. Near the temples, a web of blue veins throbbed.

“I should have been knocked out,” he repeated, putting the cap back on, “but by some miracle I was still conscious. But now, my boy, with the hatch shut from the outside, I was trapped. Trapped. At sea, inside the cockpit of my boat, with no one around. I’m telling you, it was the scariest moment of my life.”

He sneezed once and gazed down at the water, where schools of bunker swarmed, silver scales shimmering beneath the surface. Antonin waited, holding his breath. This was not the usual tourist drivel.

“Nothing but me and the fish,” murmured the old man. “And I could hear them. My boat isn’t very big. One of those cigarette boats.”

Antonin had no time to wonder what a cigarette boat was. A roguish smile suddenly lit the man’s face. “Thankfully, I had my toolbox down there.”

Taking another pause, he rubbed his nose. Antonin, now boiling with curiosity, almost interrupted, but restrained himself. It might change the stranger’s mind.

The little old man must have felt it, because he grinned before starting again. “So, I crawled to the back, where it’s the highest, and started working on the hull-panel hinges. I had some pliers and I held on to the bolt while slowly twisting the nut loose. After about an hour, I could lift open a space of about forty centimeters. It was small, but

it's a good thing I'm very short. I stuck a few life jackets in there to wedge it open, and tied myself to the motor with a rope, just in case I fell off. Then, I slowly crawled up around the outside, and snuck onto my own boat."

He paused again, and added: "I suppose I should have gone to see a doctor, but I figure it doesn't matter too much. I'm still alive, aren't I?"

He sneezed again and shook his head. "Allergies," he muttered. "They said I can't sail anymore, but I miss the water too much. So I signed up for an organized sail today, but I can't find it."

"If you want," Antonin managed to articulate, "you can come on the Monday sail with us. We still have room on the ship."

"I might do that," the man nodded. "Well, if you see Rick around, tell him Louis-Jo said hi. I miss that guy."

Shaking Antonin's hand firmly, he turned back, ambling along the way he came with shuffling steps, pausing to gaze at the docked boats bobbing on the still water.

Antonin remained alone, mouth hanging open. This guy...this guy did not talk like a tourist. He did not blather on about what big boat he owned and how many pictures he had taken of himself with which celebrity. No. His passion for racing, his will to survive even alone in the middle of the ocean, these were real. Worthy of Rose Rock chronicles.

A Friend In Need

She was an idiot. An idiot, Rosalie Mounier told herself as she made coffee.

Sure, she'd been drunk. And hey, people got drunk all of the time. Drinking out of solitude, of happiness, of ignorance, of misery...Of course, they didn't end up hooking up with their best friend. That was all her.

Anyone would know better. There were heaps of books and movies on the subject. But no, she just couldn't help herself.

Picking up the breadknife, she began slicing yesterday's loaf. It slipped once, and she frowned at the uneven cut. She would have to sharpen the blade soon. When the knife slipped again, she almost cut herself. Physical punishment. Served her right. But in the end, instinct won out, as always.

To be honest, the thought had not even been on her mind when she had called Sebastian last night. No. She had called for help because Jeremy had walked out of her life.

She tossed the slices in the toaster, opened the fridge and fished for the box of eggs at the back of the bottom shelf. Maybe she'd make an omelet. Putting the box down on the counter, she bent down to scrutinize the vegetable drawers. No tomatoes. Not good. No dill. Not good. No cheese, not even avocado or potatoes. Well, scrambled eggs would do.

Tying her hair back, she pulled out the leftover milk and closed the fridge. Easing a bowl from a cupboard, she cracked the eggs in one by one. She should go grocery shopping soon.

Why had Jeremy left so fast? After two years together, two blissful, blessed years, he had stepped out of the door with no warning. No explanation, no reason, nothing. Just a text message, a brief I-care-about-you-really-I-do-but-this-isn't-working-so-let's-stop-kidding-ourselves. She didn't remember kidding herself. She didn't remember any arguments. She didn't even remember another woman. So why?

Putting the last egg down untouched, she released a deep, shuddering breath. Fingers clutched on the counter, she felt hot tears push against her eyelids, and shoved them back. She would grieve later. With grim resolve, she grabbed the egg and hit it against the rim of the bowl to crack it open. The yolk flopped into the glass container with a viscous plop, scattering the other three, as the white dribbled down in languid strings from the shattered shell. Yes, later. Right now, there was another situation to worry about.

Sebastian.

Jeremy had left, and her first cry for help had been to him.

They'd known each other since way before college. First year of high school, when he had moved to Rose Rock with his parents. He was funny and smart, and they'd always had each other's backs. She corrected his math homework, and he helped her with English essays; she ruffled his hair to tease him when she was in high heels, and he returned the favor when she wore flats; he'd almost laughed his head off when she fell the first time she had slipped on a ski slope, and she'd laughed harder when he had tried and failed to get a sound out of her saxophone; he'd granted his approval to her three boyfriends, and she had met his (many) girlfriends after every first date; she'd gone with him to his aunt's funeral, and he'd consoled her when she had gotten rejected from her

dream grad school. They shared an unbreakable friendship, one to rival her siblinghood with her two brothers. Now that they both lived and worked in Portland, they often drove up together to Rose Rock on weekends. These drives were some of her fondest memories, the two of them laughing and listening to music way too loud. He was always there for her. Of course she had called him after Jeremy's desertion.

He had showed up at the door armed with a bottle of tequila, two packs of tissues and one of the chick flicks that he always bragged about avoiding. Mixing them drinks, he had endured listening to her blow her nose over the TV's nasal whines and wail that she didn't understand, why would Jeremy ever do this, was she not good enough, what if it really was her fault he'd left. He had been the perfect friend.

And then things had gotten messy.

Rolling her shoulders to ease off the tension, Rosalie grabbed the whisk lying in the sink, washed it meticulously and started to mix the eggs and milk. The familiar triplet beat was soothing. For a while she allowed herself to think of nothing, rhythmically blending the ingredients. One-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three...

She wished Sebastian were as simple as a triplet. Rosalie had thought he would always be a steady constant in her life. But the fact that he was still upstairs in her bed suddenly made him a full-blown waltz.

And it wasn't one to which she knew the tune. Yesterday, she could have predicted his reaction to any situation; but this morning, she was clueless. Once he sauntered down those stairs, anything might happen.

He might hate her; he might love her; he might laugh it off and lead the way back into their good old friendship. That last option was the one she preferred. Or at least she

thought she did. Didn't she? For an instant, she allowed herself to imagine his reaction in a two-dollar beach novel style.

Would it really be so bad if he came down the stairs smiling, sandy hair still tousled and a reddish line across his square jaw betraying the pillow's creases? Would she really dislike him kissing her on the cheek and calling her beautiful? He would help her pour the coffee and insist on carrying everything into the living room for her. He would compliment the omelet...no, scrambled eggs. He would launch that laughing, cocky grin of his at her like a rocket and make fun of that last meal when she burned the skin off the fish; and then he would take a deep breath, stare into her eyes and admit that yes, in all seriousness, he had always wanted to do this, and sorry if he was so abrupt but he really did like her. Couldn't believe she'd never noticed, but she'd always been oblivious, right? And she'd laugh in relief, maybe toss her head back, and admit to him that guess what, she'd had a crush on him since college first year, after he'd gotten rid of that hideous boy-band haircut, but she hadn't wanted to compromise their friendship; and he'd get that stunned expression on his face, and slowly break into a dazzling smile, one of amazement rather than cockiness, and come to sit next to her on the couch and take her hand and...

Rosalie snorted. It sounded worse than the gooey romances that her friend Lydia read when they were teenagers. Shaking her head firmly to clear it of any funny ideas, she poured the beaten eggs and milk into a hot, buttered pan and began stirring the mixture with a spatula.

It was a stupid scenario. Not to mention highly unlikely. She'd met enough of Sebastian's conquests to know what type of girl he liked: the shapely, pouty-lipped and

silver-tongued beauty who flirted like she breathed. Definitely not her. Best to keep those what-ifs locked up in the safe of her mind. Even if she half-wished they could become reality.

Most likely he would inch his way down the stairs, bleary eyes encrusted with sleep, and wordlessly drink the coffee she handed him. Then he would go wash his face, zombie-like, coming out dripping wet but awake. He would still insist on carrying the tray, because that's how he was, and she would refuse a few times for the sake of appearance before letting him lift it off the countertop. They would sit on the couch, munching their buttered toast, and eventually breach the topic of last night; and he would chortle with his throat closed, telltale sign he was uncomfortable, and tell her that it was fun but they shouldn't do that again; and she would laugh too, to ease the tension, and tell him there was no reason for their friendship to suffer because of a drunken mistake; and he would punch her shoulder, all awkwardness gone, and maybe she'd spill a bit of coffee on the carpet and he would tease her about it; then, he would tell her not to worry, Jeremy was a jerk anyway, she was better off without him, and they'd spend the rest of the day elaborating childish, impossible plans on how to get revenge on him while cleaning up last night's mess; maybe they'd even drive up to Rose Rock for the night.

Yes, that sounded more like it.

Rosalie nodded to herself, and patted the eggs to make sure the consistency was a fluffy cream, the way he liked it. She would gladly pretend nothing had happened for the sake of their friendship.

Removing the pan from the fire, she pushed a small half of the scrambled eggs into a first plate, and the rest into another. Dumping pan and spatula into the sink to wash

later, she arranged both plates onto the tray, along with the last of her clean silverware, two paper napkins, and the steaming cups of coffee. Something was missing, and she frowned, striving to remember, until she heard movement above her head.

She dove for the sink, grabbed a pan and a sponge and began scrubbing with rapid, furious movements, hoping she would look perfectly normal to anyone coming down the bedroom stairs.

It would be fine, no problem at all, she would just turn around when he came down and he'd smile and...

The floorboards creaked like old joints, and discreet footsteps pattered down. Turning around, hands mechanically rinsing off the pan, she began to smile, but stopped to stare in confusion.

There he was, yes.

Fully dressed. With shoes on. A bag on his shoulder. Face looking if anything like a kid caught sneaking candy into his room.

"Good morning", he tried with a fake smile, one that looked disturbing and out of place on a face she knew so well.

She stared for another few seconds, processing the strange situation, vaguely aware that the water faucet was still gushing into the sink. Something wasn't right. She had never seen that smile before. And there was a slight, acrid smell in the air. Insidious. Inhaling, she got another whiff of the flavor, and all of a sudden remembered what the tray was missing: toast! A crumb must have fallen at the bottom of the toaster and burned. The smell had been putting her off. No time for that now.

“Morning, sleepyhead!” she gave him a broad smile, aware of the delay in her reaction. Hoping to cover up her disconcertment, she gestured at the tray with a soap-covered hand: “Breakfast?”

Sebastian shifted from foot to foot, and hitched his bag higher up on his shoulder. “I’m good, really, thanks.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, finding it a lot more difficult to inhale. Why was he avoiding her eyes? Maybe he was embarrassed. And that irritating burning smell was getting stronger! “Cause I scrambled some eggs, and...”

“No, listen, Lili, I really should get going, I have a meeting and I’m already late so...”

“On a Saturday?” she blurted out in disbelief. Why was he lying to her? Like a telescope shifting focus, the answer suddenly appeared in her mind. This was what he did with other women. He was treating her, she realized in shame and anger, like one of his one-night stands. How had she never realized how cruel that could be? “Seb, no one has meetings on a Saturday.”

“Yeah, well I do. Sucks, right?” He snickered, a terrifying imitation of himself, and turned to follow the steps down to the front door. “Maybe another time, okay?”

Numb, she did nothing as he rushed down the last few steps and paused to turn the handle. Without looking back.

Only then did she notice that her hands, dropped by her sides, were dripping soap on the floor and on her bare feet.

The rides to Rose Rock would be awkward from now on. If they ever happened again. He might not call her on Fridays to offer her a ride up anymore. She would miss

the drive and the jokes he told to “Living on a Prayer”. She would miss the way his voice cracked when he sang in falsetto. She would miss him.

The toaster finally jumped, spitting out the bread with a resonating thump. She heard the front door slam in the toaster’s echo, like an afterthought.

A friend indeed.

Her eyes roamed from the stairs back to the toaster on the countertop, the acrid smell making it now impossible for her to breathe.

The toast was burned black.

L'Echappée Belle

Paris, City of Lights. She was there at last.

Rosemary gazed at the thousands small scenes unfolding around her, the day-to-day theater of people going about their lives. A couple at a café terrace, sipping black coffee from polished white cups. A boy skipping between his parents along the quays of the Seine. An old man smoking his cigarette on the bridge. The ballet of books passing from hand to hand along the bouquinistes' boxes, the haggling of prices for a second edition print of Bernard Clavel's first novel. Notre Dame enthroned, feet deep in the river, bell towers watching over the streets.

She would have hugged it if she could.

Rosemary Mounier-Pringent had left Rose Rock two days ago, taking a direct Air France flight from Portland. Unable to contain her excitement, she had wiled away the hours separating her from France by watching movie after movie with subtitles and reading her travel guide. This, she promised herself, would be the best vacation ever. It was her first one out of the country, and she planned on making every second count.

After weeks of arguing, she had convinced her parents she would be fine going alone. Over and over, she had reminded them of all the extra French classes she had taken in middle, high school, and college, of the importance of reconnecting to their French heritage, of the money she had saved up for this by working late night shifts at Rose Rock Café every vacation. This wasn't like study abroad, which had been too expensive for her to go. This was just a week, for senior spring break. She would understand if they said no to Miami, where all her friends were going, but this trip was educational. She would

improve her French accent. And it could serve as a scouting expedition to see if she ever wanted to live there. She solemnly swore she would not speak English the whole time she was there, and email them every day. Please, please, please! In the end, they had relented.

Now, she was here, alone in Paris for a full week. A week wasn't enough for everything she wanted to see, but with careful planning, she was positive she would do it all. She had listed every café and bakery she wanted to try. She didn't even mind the continuous drizzle that had plagued her first day. It was all part of the experience.

Walking along the river, she swung her purse around like a child, trying to take in everything she could, and making mental notes to record in her notebook later. She had traversed the bridge into the fifth arrondissement, the Quartier Latin known for its university students, secondhand bookstores, and Notre Dame. There was also a shop on Ile Saint Louis that, according to her grumpy hotel manager, made the best ice cream in France.

Breathing in, she sighed with satisfaction. Even in early April, people were out and about, sitting outside for lunch or coffee, sharing a smoke, walking with long, purposeful strides, dressed in elegant coats and dresses of which most Americans would never dream. It was exactly what she had imagined.

After an extended stroll along the Seine, she reached the day's main destination. Pont des Arts. The famous bridge's arches seemed to leap from one pylon to the next. On either side of the wide pedestrian path punctuated with wooden benches, the guard-rails displayed hundreds of locks. Rosemary clutched her purse as a thrill of excitement rushed through her. This was what she had been waiting for.

She had heard about the Pont des Arts a few months ago. Her friend had mentioned a “cool new tradition” in Paris, begun a few weeks back but already hugely popular: tying a lock on the bridge. Rosemary’s imagination had immediately been captivated. She wanted to be a part of it, to make her own little mark on the city. She had asked her friend for more details, and added it to her list.

Stepping onto the bridge, she ceremoniously pulled a brand new lock and key out of her bag. She had bought it this morning. It was a plain brass lock, with her initials, RM, scratched silver on the side, but as she leaned forward and locked it around a small free space on the railing, she felt the weight of tradition settle upon her shoulders. All these other locks around her own were people. Lovers, parents, children, all had come to make a wish, to be a part of this artful ritual. Maybe, someday, she would come back and tie another lock with a special someone. Kissing the key, she closed her eyes for an instant and tossed it into the waves beneath her. The small chunk of metal glinted once before sinking into the thick, green water.

Now, Rosemary thought with a smile, she was truly a part of Paris. Sitting on a wooden bench, she pulled out her notebook and began transcribing the momentous event.

The next evening found Rosemary seated at a crowded bar. It hadn’t been on her list, but the place she had tried before had been packed, and an elegant, long-coated man outside she had inquired to had suggested this one, jabbering in rapid French that all the tourists liked it. Since her feet hurt after walking all over Montparnasse, she hadn’t looked any further.

Now, slumped on a high stool at the counter, she moodily nursed her glass of wine. Her teachers had always told her she had an excellent accent, yet this Parisian had somehow known she was a tourist. Maybe she had to practice more. Or maybe she had asked something that would have been obvious to any local.

Even more frustrating was the fact that she had barely been able to practice so far. Granted, it had only been three days, but she would have thought she would be friends with at least one person by now. Instead, she wandered the streets alone, eavesdropping on nearby conversations for practice, and interacting with shop vendors and the occasional waiter, all of who were too busy to chat with her more than a minute. That, she decided, taking another sip from her glass, was the problem with big cities. People were just too busy to talk.

But it was something else, too. Rosemary frowned, trying to give her feeling a name. So far, being here had felt like knocking at a smooth wall of French in hopes of being given a door. Not even a door. A single toehold would suffice, really. Something, anything for her to cross through. These people might have been nice, but they never interacted with her simply because they had no reason to do so. She wasn't a friend or family, or anything other than a face on the street to them. Maybe she should have come through a study abroad program after all, despite the cost. At least she would have a host family, or fellow students. Pushing a strand of hair away from her eye, Rosemary admitted to herself that what she felt was loneliness.

No, this wouldn't do. She was in Paris! Chin up, Rosemary ordered herself sternly. You're the one who decided to come here by yourself in the first place. You'd better make the most of it. Write a list of the things you've seen.

Pulling out her notebook, she scribbled *Paris* as a title, and paused to think. What had she liked about Paris so far?

Rain on the Seine. White Haussmanian buildings making triangles on the map to match the pyramid in a castle courtyard. High heels and a cigarette. A second edition of L'Œuvre au Noir. People rushing in and out of the metro in great waves of nervous hurry. Locks on the Pont des Arts.

Eating breakfast at the terrace of a café. The air is a mix of cigarette smoke, coffee and humid sunshine. Once in a while, the flowery perfume of the lady sitting at the table on the right wafts to your nose as she readjusts her blue pashmina scarf. The waiter in black and white, looking rather sharp, gives you a thin smile with your bowl of café au lait and a delicate white plate on which rests a golden pain au chocolat. The smell of it is enticing, sugary and light, until you can't resist taking a bite. When you pick it up, the crisp dough crackles under your fingers, still warm from the oven. The chocolate has started melting on one side, and your fingers feel sticky with butter.

The black and white paintings in the streets of Montparnasse. The bouquinistes with their bottle-green boxes open wide on troves of books by the water, not even bothering to shout you over because they know you've been hooked by their worded wonders. People striding past you. Rive Gauche.

Much better. Rosemary nodded to herself and put the notebook away. Think of positive things. Like...the bartender! Neat black hair over a black shirt, he hadn't commented on an accent when she had ordered her drink. That was something!

Then again, this bar *did* welcome tourists.

As if to confirm that thought, a loud trio took the seats to her left. Analyzing them, Rosemary frowned in annoyance and feigned sudden interest in her glass. Three women, probably in their early forties, all sporting wedding rings on pudgy fingers and blond blowout hairdos, were vociferating at each other in what sounded like a Boston accent, squabbling on whether to order wine or cocktails. A young French couple, who also looked like they had stumbled into this touristy place by accident, gave them a long, raised-eyebrowed look before resuming their meal. Rosemary was suddenly glad there was a seat between the women and her. She didn't want to be associated with "loud Americans".

"Jeez, why is there no English on this menu?" exclaimed the nearest dyed-haired platinum blond in an eye-watering purple Juicy Couture ensemble.

Because you're in France, silently responded Rosemary with an internal sigh. It was a little disturbing to see women her mother's age acting and dressing like teenagers. Her mother wouldn't have been caught dead in anything less than a polished skirt or dress, or at least a nice wraparound jacket.

"Don't worry, honey, it can't be that complicated," replied the frizzy-haired one near Rosemary. The bangles covering her arm clattered as she reached over to grab the menu. "We can just share something, yah? Like cheese?"

"*Oh*," gushed the third woman as she dug through her I-heart-Paris bag, "wine and cheese night, that's *so* cute!"

"I'll order," declared Bangles with authority.

Reaching out, she snapped her fingers at the bartender:

“Excuse me! Jee view leh plate-oh dee fro-ma-jee.” Checking her guidebook, she added, “sill-view-plait.”

Rosemary felt like banging her head repeatedly against the counter. How the bartender kept a straight face she didn't know. Maybe it was part of his tourist training. He did raise an eyebrow, however, and took an instant to stare at them before responding in passable English:

“Sorree, wat deed you want?”

“Plate-oh dee fro-ma-jee!” insisted Bangles, shaking the menu under his nose with an affronted look.

Juicy outfit was less polite. Leaning toward her I-heart-Paris friend, she began whispering about rude French people. The bartender glared at her.

That was too much. Rosemary leaned over and gave the bartender an apologetic smile.

“*Elles voudraient le plateau de fromage, Monsieur.*” And, in a quiet tone, “*Je suis désolée.*”

Without detaching his frosty look from the blond trio, he nodded once. “*Merci, mademoiselle.*”

As he turned away, Juicy outfit addressed her other friend. “Did you see how he stared at me? It was so rude! Asking us what we want and acting all high and mighty...”

“He was just doing his job,” remarked Rosemary.

“Wait,” realized Bangles, turning toward Rosemary, “you're American.”

“That's fantastic!” burst out I-heart-Paris, “It's so nice to meet you!”

As the three women switched to sugary smiles and cheerful chatter, Rosemary sighed. She should have known there would be no going back once she revealed where she was from.

She found out that “the girls”, as they referenced themselves, had all met at their country club playing tennis, enjoyed Pinot Grigio on Fridays and bright red, “summertime” nail-polish, and were doing a week out away from the kids.

“We needed a break, you know?” added I-heart-Paris, who was married to Bernie the banker.

As the four of them exchanged pleasantries and shared the cheese platter, Rosemary found herself actually enjoying their company. Any company, after all, was better than none. They exclaimed at her bravery when she told them she was traveling alone, and when they realized they were all staying at the same hotel, seemed to decide to take her under their collective wing. They weren’t all bad, thought Rosemary as they babbled about their visit to the Sacré Cœur. Almost sweet, really. Just very loud.

“Fellow Americans! It’s my lucky day!”

A stout man with a scruff of beard leaned against the counter next to them. In his polo and Nantucket red shorts, it was difficult to tell how old he was. His thirties? Forties? He inquired about their names and origins, offering a lazy grin as he introduced himself in turn.

“Can I get you ladies a drink?”

“Well sure!” Juicy Couture tittered.

Rosemary smiled politely back and waved at her glass of wine. “I’m all set, thank you sir.”

“Now there’s no need to call me sir, darling. I’m Jack, remember?”

“There’s no need to call me darling, Jack. I’m Rosemary, *remember?*”

“Wow, this one’s got attitude! I like that,” he exclaimed with a laugh. Ignoring the sugary smile Juicy Couture was throwing at him, he leaned in closer. “So why are you in Paris?”

“I’m just visiting,” replied Rosemary, shifting in her seat. “Leaving soon.”

“I can show you around if you like,” he offered with a confident smile. “I work on United, you know, so I’m here all the time in between flights.”

“Isn’t that right?” exclaimed Juicy Couture with a flirtatious giggle. “You must know all about Paris then!”

“A real expert,” remarked Rosemary with heavy sarcasm.

He took it in stride and kept going. “I can’t call myself an expert of course, but...”

As they chatted, it came to Rosemary that the guy was trying to get with her. Despite her protests, he ordered her several refills of wine, waving it off when she insisted on paying him back. Making jokes about his work, his colleagues and his family, he asked more about her and her travel plans. When she attempted an escape by speaking French to the bartender, he demanded to know how she spoke such good French.

She couldn’t lie to herself, reflected Rosemary, easing into the conversation. Despite his obvious hints, it was nice to be the center of someone’s attention. Jack was friendly (overly so), chatty and seemed to like hearing what she had to say. Would it really be so bad, she wondered, to let this happen?

Movement caught her eye, interrupting her musings. The French couple she had noticed earlier at a nearby table had paid their bill. Standing, the man came to the woman's side to pull out her chair, and held out her coat with a smile. As she put it on, he whispered in her ear, and she laughed. Rosemary noticed they held hands as they walked out.

A pang of nostalgia hit her. That was what Rosemary wanted. Something serious and sweet, not just some passing conquest in a foreign bar. The kind every little girl dreamed about before the world hit you in the face with a few crappy experiences, leaving you with a bitter taste in your mouth and a cynical perspective.

Yes, it really was nice to be the center of someone's attention. But his attention now felt coarse and almost rude. Besides, she had no intention of spoiling her Paris adventure with a guy. Not to mention she had broken her no-English rule.

Picking up her coat and purse, she claimed a sudden headache and excused herself.

"I can distract you from that if you like," offered Jack with a roguish smile.

Rosemary didn't even blink. "I'll manage, thank you."

As she headed home, the three women waved her off with great promises to "*totally* plan something together". Touched despite the hollowness of their words, she smiled and waved back.

The air outside was chilly. Rosemary made her way back to her hotel, short heels tapping on the pavements. Overall, she decided as she walked, she was glad of this meeting. These women had been sweet. It had also reminded her of why she liked Europe so much. She really could see herself moving here. There had to be job opportunities for

a writer here after graduation. Something more enriching than waitressing at Rose Rock Café like she did over winter breaks. She wouldn't let her parents convince her otherwise, like they had when she had wanted to study abroad.

C'est mon chemin.

Making her way downstairs the next morning, Rosemary reviewed her plans for the day. She was visiting the Musée de l'Orangerie, with stops along the way to examine new cafés and side streets that might strike her fancy. It wasn't close, but that was the best way to discover a city: take the time to wander the streets, explore the hidden secrets there might be. Alone.

Entering the breakfast room, a small, brightly lit affair with round tables and a pastry buffet, she chose her favorite spot by the window. Putting down her notebook and pen, she ordered an Americano coffee and went to grab a *pain au chocolat*. As she finished wiping the crumbs off her fingers, a cheerful voice called out her name.

"Rosemary, hi!" The three women of last night were sitting a few tables away, waving at her with enthusiasm. "Come on over! How was your night? Is your headache better?"

With a smile, Rosemary migrated to their table, claiming the last chair. "My night was good, pretty quiet. Yours?"

"Oh well, you won't believe what happened to Georgia," began Bangles as Juicy Couture, in an overlarge grey sweatshirt, nodded emphatically.

"Oh yeah, really dramatic," interrupted I-heart-Paris, who today was sporting a bright red baseball cap. "She and Jack..."

“Let me tell, it’s my story!” exclaimed Juicy Couture.

The other two muttered, but simmered down, letting their friend tell the tale.

Turning to Rosemary with a wounded look, she dropped her voice to a conspiratorial half whisper.

“So. After you left, we were talking to Jack, just having a good time. And he was getting mighty friendly, buying us drinks and putting an arm around my shoulders...”

“Not that she minded,” added Bangles with a giggle and an envious look.

Rosemary stared, forgetting the story. Why was she *envious*?

“It was cute, but anyway, let me finish! I start getting pretty tired, see, and he offered to walk me home, super sweet and everything, because I was worried of getting lost all by myself. So we walk back, but then we were at his hotel, not ours! And I get all pretend-angry, like Jack that’s not where I’m staying, you could have just said if you didn’t know, and he’s all like oh, but I thought you meant *my* home, and then we kiss, and I’m still pretend angry, but I’m like whatever, you know, I might as well now that we’re here. So we go upstairs, and have a really good time, but then, you know what?”

She paused for drama, taking in a breath, and looked expectantly at Rosemary. Nauseous, Rosemary felt obligated to ask the inevitable question.

“What?”

“That jerk kicked me out when we were done! Said he slept better alone in his bed, what an ass, didn’t even walk me to the door or anything...”

Staring at a gesticulating Juicy Couture, who was now elaborating on the finer points of her adventure, Rosemary caught the glint of her wedding band. The worse thing was, she seemed to be enjoying the attention, the drama, the story. Rosemary was willing

to bet this would make the top news of whatever country club they were a part of as soon as they planned their next tennis match.

Ignoring the clucks and coos from “the girls”, Rosemary detached herself from the conversation. Her stomach was roiling, and not because of breakfast. The proper word in French was *dégoutée*. She was *dégoutée* with Jack, the wedding rings and the blond blowouts.

She stood, feeling her legs shake beneath her, and mentioned finishing breakfast.

“Do you want to come visit the Eiffel Tower with us? We’re driving there because it’s far, but it should be fun, we got tickets and everything!”

“I’m alright, thanks, I have to meet a friend.”

The lie rolled smoothly off her tongue as she walked away. Sitting back down at her own little table, alone, she sighed in relief. Her eyes wandered over the open notebook, waiting for her words to fill the page, and to her white coffee cup, empty now, lined with a ring of dark residue at the bottom.

“*Un autre Americano, mademoiselle?*”

She turned with a start. Lost in thought, she had not noticed the waiter’s approach.

“*Un autre?*”

Gazing at the cup, then at the three women still in her line of vision, she felt goose bumps rise along her arm.

“*Non merci.*”

Wanderlust

Nothing had changed.

Kendra Leberre gazed down the winding road of Main Street, with its quaint shops and brightly painted doorways. The porch roofs were mantled in the soft fuzz of holiday frost, and the air smelled nitrogenous. Yes, even if she had done everything to leave it, Rose Rock's narrow streets and Christmas decorations still felt like home.

Nothing like California. She shivered and stepped back through the doorway. Climbing up the narrow staircase to her apartment, she firmly told herself to stop thinking about it. No good would come of crying over Bobby, the cheating, and the divorce again. She did not miss any of it. Not even the heat.

It had been so simple at first. Fleeing Rose Rock and the memories tainted with her mother Anika's mess, she had escaped to Chicago for college, as a layover on her way to the other coast. San Francisco, the tech community, and Bobby had been everything she could have wanted. Sensible, stable, sober. Everything her mother was not.

Anika had chased them all away, one at a time, as the years went by. When the chance had come, they had each sailed off with relief in search of brighter horizons. They might tell themselves they had been drawn out by a desire for exploration, but the truth was they had started looking toward the outside light because the inside felt so dark. So maybe, in a weird, twisted way, Anika was actually to be thanked for the rest of the family's attraction to traveling.

Until the failure of her marriage, Kendra had convinced herself she would never come back to Maine. Rose Rock was tucked safely in her past. But she had needed an escape, a space to curl into and get her life together. This had been the first to come to mind. Her boss knew Bobby. He understood. He had given her a month. And here she was.

The door creaked when she pushed it open. The apartment was bare, plain walls leaning over the suitcases she still hadn't unpacked. The bed looked cheeriest, covered in the bright blanket Grand-Maman had quilted five years ago. That, and their Breton heritage, was all Kendra had left of her paternal grandmother now. A single picture on the nightstand of the three of them, Dad, her brother Thomas and her, winked in the afternoon sunlight.

Kendra missed them. They didn't live here anymore, having been drawn away by the siren call of the great wide somewhere just as she had been. But being here, being back, keenly reminded her of their absence. Grand-Maman lay in Vieille France Cemetery, Thomas was traveling with his wife Emily, and Dad, the desultory sea captain, would be sailing in the Caribbean for the next few weeks, like he often did now that she and Thomas no longer lived at home. She couldn't blame him. With Anika the way she was, she didn't want stay at their house either. But she refused to keep away from Rose Rock just because of her mother any longer.

Stepping into the minuscule kitchen, Kendra filled the kettle with tap water, and set it to boil for some tea. What a strange thing, she reflected, that a single, small town like this could hold so many good things and so many bad ones all at once. Unbidden, memories of Rose Rock emerged in her mind, an array of weekends learning French from

Grand-Maman, sailing around the island with Dad and Thomas, and dealing with her mother when she'd been drinking. The way Anika yelled at them when they tried to put her to bed. How she had tripped on Kendra's guitar and broken it in a rage. How she had slapped Thomas for locking the liquor cabinet. How she spent the vacation and college funds Dad had so carefully put away on alcohol.

Pouring the hot water into her favorite teapot, Kendra dropped in a bag of Earl Grey, and frowned. The yellow and green pot had a chipped spout. When had that happened? Maybe during the move. Or maybe Bobby had chipped it. She wouldn't put it past him. He always hated her artsy ceramics. "Too pretentious". Well, he hated a lot of things she did. Screw Bobby.

Despite the damaged spout, the pot poured just fine. Kendra filled her mug and carried it back to the bed, savoring the bergamot fragrance. She knew she shouldn't blame everything on Bobby, but it was too easy right now. Wrapping herself into her blanket, she curled up by the window and took a sip, feeling like a little child again. This wouldn't be so bad. She just had to think of this as home again.

There were still a few days until Christmas. She would bake some cookies if her landlady let her use her oven, and get pralines at the bakery. Oh, and lamb. She would cook lamb. Bobby never let her eat lamb. He and his delicate stomach. She sniffed.

It had been his favorite excuse when they travelled. Granted, they had been to other countries, but every time Bobby had insisted on staying in expensive resorts, the kind that served gluten-free breakfasts and massages by the chlorinated pool. The first one had been an exciting discovery for Kendra. By the third, they all began to blur together. It was always the same fancy entertainment, the same catered food, the same

smiling staff. When, restless, she had suggested they stay in a local hotel, go on hikes or explore pottery shops, he had claimed he needed a break from work. He had made her feel guilty for wanting to explore the world outside of the resort.

But Bobby didn't have a say in her life anymore. Now, she realized with growing delight as she sipped her tea, she could stay in whatever hostel struck her fancy, and eat local dishes that would have made Bobby's "delicate stomach" roil.

"Noël prochain, j'irais à Saint-Malo."

It felt right, somehow, to fulfill a childhood dream with her newfound freedom. Grand-Maman would have been thrilled. Kendra had always told her she would go to Bretagne someday, to see where her grandmother had grown up. She had heard so many tales about chalk-white cliffs and rocky beaches, about crepes and omelets frothing with cheese, about salt marshes, ancient monasteries and fields of standing stones. Now, without Bobby's pessimism, traveling there next Christmas seemed like a perfect goal. A bright new horizon to chase.

Finishing her tea, Kendra stood. With these Christmas plans made, her body buzzed with energy. She rinsed the mug, put on a coat and hat, and raced downstairs.

Walking briskly in the winter wind, she soon reached Fifre Place. She had long deliberated, but even though Espérance Plaza had a better baker, Fifre was safer right now. Espérance Plaza was too close to her mother's house and the school where she taught. And Anika loved sweets, so she might be at the bakery. If she was sober.

What would she do if she passed her on the street? Ideally, Anika wouldn't notice her. If she did, Kendra would simply have to pretend she didn't know her. Wait, that wouldn't work. Anika wasn't above making a scandal. Maybe just be the better person,

nod at her and keep going. And not return to her apartment until she was sure her mother wasn't following her.

Above all else, Kendra knew she wouldn't let herself be dragged into a lengthy conversation. Talking about herself was one thing, but she didn't want to accidentally force Thomas or Dad into the mess. Anika would drunkenly try to contact them, and she knew that Thomas, at least, had never told his wife about her. It would ruin everything.

That had been their silent agreement, a pact between the three of them, as they left one by one. They would still be a family, but Anika must not know. Kendra had attended Thomas' wedding, had been there for the birth of her nephew, and still sent them care packages, even when he jokingly complained that she fussed like a grandma. Dad had taken them on a few trips, and sailed through the Panama Canal one year to bring her flowers on her birthday. Yes, they would always be a family. Just away.

Of course, she was back now. But it wasn't for long. Besides, she was stronger and older and wiser and all those things. And, she noted as she glanced at herself in the mirror, she didn't really look like Kendra-from-Rose-Rock anymore. Her hair was corporate-short, and she had gotten into the Californian habit of wearing lively colored shirts and lace. Yes, Kendra-from-California could handle her mother.

The holiday market teemed with vendors that afternoon, little shops sprouting over each other like mushrooms around the central fountain, and selling anything from mulled wine to old watches, from Christmas ornaments to handcrafted music boxes. Wandering around the stalls, Kendra felt a pang of nostalgia. Thomas and she had come here often before to help Dad at his stand. Woodworking was a hobby he had picked up from a ship's carpenter when he was young. He would sell his woodwork of sturdy

furniture and delicately carved statues, whistling as he whittled a new piece of white pine, his lips pursing out through his graying beard.

Drifting around the market, she reached the other side of the plaza, where the florist, the butcher and the cheese shops aligned side by side like toy soldiers in their bright holiday uniforms. Their clean vitrines glowed with light, a welcoming sight after the chilly wind. She would get lamb first. Then maybe something from the florist to brighten up her flat. Not the artificially vivid flowers that Bobby used to buy her in California and that faded after a few days. No, she needed an honest green plant. Something that wouldn't require constant care, and lasted a long time.

Kendra pushed the door of the butcher's shop and hurried into the warm interior. Rubbing her hands to get the blood flowing, she approached the displays. After a cursory scan, she found the lamb chops. Did she only want one? She would be eating alone after all. No, she would get two. She hadn't tasted any in so long.

Looking up to order, her eyes met those of the butcher. She blinked. Was that Raymond?

The blue-grey eyes facing hers crinkled at the corners. So he recognized her too.

"These two, please," she asked, pointing at the lamb shops nearest to her.

The tall man bent to take a closer look at the meat.

"Give me a second," he responded, his rich tenor resonating between the white walls of the store. "I have nicer ones in the back."

Smiling at her, he turned and ambled into the back room, where some half-chopped meat and pools of blood glistened on clinically white countertops.

Kendra shook herself. Raymond. How could she have forgotten he still lived here?

They were close friends in childhood and then had dated steadily throughout high school. He had been her escape, always welcoming and warm when things got too unbearable at home. His mom danced with her and taught her to bake, and his dad always chatted about the latest gossip, taking in her opinion like an adult's. Raymond might have told them, but they had had the tact never to ask why she would sometimes show up for dinner or weekends with a tearstained face. Theirs had been an almost brother-sister relationship, particularly after Thomas had left for college. He had been for her what Thomas was: a refuge.

After Kendra had gone to Chicago for college, they had made it work for about a semester, until she had decided long distance was too complicated. And too costly since it required her to return to Rose Rock. She had been frank with him, he, though disappointed, had understood. It had been a relief to no longer be moored to him or the town. She had finally cut the lines and set her course to explore and wander where the stars took her. Of course, her dead reckoning navigation had washed her into a jagged reef in California.

Raymond returned and carefully laid out two large lamb chops on the counter. He had changed, she noted. Still tall, taller than Bobby, with a new strength in the shoulders from working at the shop, and the beginning of a beard surrounding creases of the mouth that were not there before.

With efficient movements, he wrapped the pieces in white paper, weighed them, and tucked them into a plastic bag.

“It’s good to see you again, Kendra,” he said with another smile.

His hands were rough and his nails uneven, but cautious as he handed her the bag over the counter. Bobby, who prided himself on well-groomed hands, would have hated them.

“It’s good to be back, even for a month.”

“Only a month? That’s a shame.”

Pulling out her purse to pay, she noticed that he was twisting his calloused fingers together. She remembered that tic. He was concerned or nervous about something.

“Would you...um...want to catch up?” he articulated. “Because, you know, it’s been a while.”

Kendra felt a rush of affection for her friend, and an equal rush of guilt for having not kept in touch. It hadn’t been his fault that she had gone to college so far away. Or that she hadn’t wanted to return.

“That would be great,” she replied warmly. “I want to know what you’ve been up to.”

His face brightened under the white butcher cap. “I finish work in an hour. We could walk to Neptune Cove if you like.”

“Alright. I can meet you then.”

“Come by a bit after four and you can say hi to Paps. You know he’d love to see you.”

That suddenly made a lot more sense. She had forgotten his father used to run the butcher shop when they were younger. Raymond must have taken over. Picking up her bag, Kendra stuffed the receipt inside and walked out after waving goodbye.

One door over, she entered the florist's tropically humid store and breathed in deeply. She had always loved this place. It smelled earthy, green and wet, and reminded her of faraway jungles and exotic summers on coastlines she'd never seen. And of Dad. He had inherited a passionate love of botany from Grand-Maman. How many hours had they spent on their knees, planting things in the dirt and watching them grow? Until they had made the mistake of leaving Anika in charge of watering once, and returned to find the plants dried and dead. When they had asked why she hadn't taken care of it as promised, she had grumbled that what they grew was useless anyway, so why should she bother? After that, they had abandoned gardening, and left that patch of earth bare. But Dad would still take her to the flower shop after market days and point out fantastically shaped flowers with foreign-flavored names. They teased her, offering her a taste of their native lands with their bright colors and fragrances. Even now, years later, she could hear him name each of them.

“Bird of paradise. Forget-me-not. Ghost orchid. *Rose trémière*. That's a special one, *ma puce*. When the flower dies, it makes a funny little pod full of seeds that rattle. I brought five bags of those back from France one summer because Grand-Maman wanted so desperately to plant some in her backyard.”

But she wouldn't get flowers. Not this time. She would invest in a sturdy little plant.

A good twenty minutes later, she stepped out of the store, cradling a glass terrarium full of budding succulents. After long reflection, these had finally won her over because all they needed was bright light and water every few weeks. And because Mr.

Jean-Guy had evoked the dry, sandy heat of their native Mexican desert in dreamlike detail.

Balancing her plants and her purse, she then went into the cheese shop, taking her time to peruse and nibble samples. In the end, she bought a piece of Roquefort and another of Brie, reminding herself that she could always come back later.

Checking her watch as she stepped out of the shop, she realized if she had to be back at the butcher's by four o'clock, she had to hurry home to put everything away. She soon reached her apartment, rushing back as carefully as her new plants would allow. Tossing the lamb chops and cheese in the fridge, she settled the terrarium in a patch of sun on the windowsill. Quickly, she changed into a clean shirt, gave her hair a perfunctory brush, and grabbed a pair of gloves before heading back out.

Raymond was waiting patiently outside the shop, bundled in a large coat and a grey beanie lowered to his eyebrows. He smiled cheerfully when he spotted her, and gave her a one-armed hug, carrying a bag in his other hand. His scent was still the same, comforting and gentle.

"You're in luck, Paps is here!" he exclaimed, steering her into the store with a warm hand.

Raymond's father was indeed there, taking an order from a man she didn't recognize and his little boy.

"Kendra!" he exclaimed when he spotted her. "I didn't know you were back!"

"Only for a month, Gilbert, sir."

"Don't 'sir' me, silly girl!"

Hurrying around the counter, he wiped his bloody hands on his apron and gave her a bear hug. For the next few minutes, he cheerfully pummeled her with questions Kendra barely had time to answer, interspersed with tidbits of town news. How had college been? Had she gone to grad school? She was always smart, look at her father, it was no surprise. She might not know, she'd been away for so long, but had she heard that the Henri boy, Antonin, was getting married next month? He was a friend of her brother wasn't he, and speaking of which how was Thomas? He hadn't been around for a while either. Did he still paint? There would be a job for him with the old lighthouse, he was telling her, but she hadn't seen her mother yet? Had they made peace since she was back?

As he paused to draw breath, Raymond quickly intervened.

"All right, Paps, she can't answer all of it at once!" he remarked, laughing. "And we have to get going, we're taking a walk to Neptune Cove."

"Oh well you should go before it gets too cold, the ocean wind is chilly here. You remember, Kendra."

"Of course," she replied with a faint smile.

"You come over to dinner sometime, okay? I know Monique would love to see you. And she still makes a royal apple pie."

After assuring him that she would love to come by for dinner, Kendra led the way out of the door. As Raymond and she oriented their steps toward the beach, she felt a strange squeeze to her chest. They were so stable. What she wouldn't give for a tightly knit family like theirs. Nothing like constantly cleaning up after a churlish, inebriated parent. Nothing like the shame of the two times they had woken up to early phone calls

from the pub asking them to come and take her mother home. Bitterness threatened to engulf her, and she resolutely pushed it away.

“I’m sorry about Paps,” began Raymond, as though reading her turbulent mind, “sometimes his tongue moves faster than his thoughts. He didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No, it’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

“You know,” he started after a short pause, “if you want to talk about it, about her, I’ll listen.”

“It’s okay, really. But thanks. How far down the beach did you want to go?”

“I was thinking of heading to the Rock,” replied Raymond, easily catching onto the change of topic. “Since it’s one of your favorite places.”

“It is,” Kendra agreed, pleasantly surprised, “I didn’t think you would remember.”

“Are you kidding? The number of times you dragged me there to watch the sunset or talk! You said it was the most peaceful place in town! Apart from Mam’s kitchen of course...”

Catching up, they chatted about Thomas’ baby boy, the old Chevy Raymond used to drive, that time she had soaked her dress in the sea after prom. They strolled along the harbor until they reached the narrow path that carved into the cliff and down to the rocky beach. Keeping a careful pace, the two of them made their way down the slippery stone steps and along the shoreline.

Could this be home? The thought snuck into her mind as Raymond lent her a tall shoulder to steady herself. What would have happened, she wondered, if she had returned after college? Would they have kept dating? Would she have moved into his protective arms, safe from Anika’s drunken madness and fits of rage? Or would she have left again?

Dusk crept nearer on velvet paws as she explained the fiasco called Bobby, and he told her about the not-quite-tourist Bianca. It watched with starry eyes when the tall man wrapped the shivering night-haired woman in the extra sweater he had thought to bring, and pricked a single sunset-red ear in curiosity when the woman finally sighed and went mute. Interesting, thought Dusk as it slinked along, making its silent, sentinel round around the Earth.

Interesting, thought Kendra as Raymond wrapped an arm around her. It seemed they were falling right back into the place they had been before she'd gone. A strong, solid, steady relationship. It had occurred so seamlessly she had barely noticed. If she stayed...for a moment, she allowed herself to entertain the possibility.

She could move back. It wasn't like she was particularly attached to California anyway. And she seemed to recall that her company had an outpost in New England. Or maybe just work from home. She would be closer to Thomas, and Dad might come and visit more. She would have a solid family, a reassuring enclosure warding Anika away.

Raymond's strong arms lifted her up. With a surprised gasp, she found herself perched on a large, flat rock.

"I have a surprise," Raymond announced as he took a seat next to her.

"What is it?" asked Kendra cautiously.

With a conjurer's mischievous smile, he pulled bread and some cold cuts out of the bag he had been carrying.

"Night picnic," he proclaimed loudly, scaring a couple of nearby seagulls into flight.

Speechless for an instant, Kendra began laughing. After spending so long in Bobby's restrictively practical shadow, she had forgotten what a pleasant impromptu felt like. The steam of the warm bread swirled in the cold air.

"Here," Raymond said, offering a piece of bread covered in a thick slice of prosciutto, "that will change you from all the foreign California stuff."

"Cali is in the United States, you know," Kendra commented before taking a bite. The warm bread and smoked ham filled her mouth. Delicious.

"Sure," shrugged Raymond, "but it's like a different country out there on the other coast. And I heard they have weird people who don't eat meat."

"Have you never wanted to go there? To see it?" she asked, pausing mid-bite.

"I did when I was younger, but now I don't think it's for me," he replied honestly. He draped two more slices over a piece of bread. "Everything I need is here, you know?"

Kendra knew she must have looked skeptical, because he patiently went on:

"I mean, think about it. I have a comfortable job that will provide for my family. And the business is mine when Paps decides to retire. I have a perfectly good home to live in. I know a lot of people don't like living with their parents, but I'm saving money, and that way I can take care of Mam and Paps when they're older. Besides, isn't this one of the most beautiful places on Earth?"

With a sweeping motion, he gestured at the scene around them. Night had almost fallen now. Only the red and gold afterglow of sunset lit the horizon, burnishing the underside of the clouds like melted copper. The light glinted off the glass of the old lighthouse, striped red and white like a candy cane. Stoically guarding the point, it wore a crown of twigs from an osprey nest. A few seagulls cried out at them from the craggy

cliff while the waves crashed rhythmically on the rocks. It looked timeless, thought Kendra, leaning back as a slight breeze rose from the north.

As though reading her mind once again, Raymond nodded. “Why would we ever leave Rose Rock?”

About to take the last bite of her bread, Kendra paused. There was honest truth to his words. It would be so easy to stay. Too easy.

A faint whiff of fetid air tickled her nostrils. Turning her head, she spotted the body of a dead fish at the shoreline, gaping at her with a white, broken jaw. She slowly stood and stepped down from their picnic rock to get a closer look. The bluefish carcass, now missing chunks of flesh, lay tangled in nylon line and long ropes of brown seaweed, an empty eye socket staring blindly at the sky.

“Poor thing,” remarked Raymond, who had come up behind her. “It must have gotten caught up in that line and then the tide washed it in. Looks really sad, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah it does.”

Kendra finished the last of her bread and glanced over at Rose Rock, where the founders had landed long ago. The colossal chunk of granite sat facing the ocean like a frozen giant, its silhouette cutting across the gleaming horizon. It seemed ready to resist anything, except maybe erosion. Just like Raymond.

“Wouldn’t you,” asked Kendra pensively, “even want to see if other places on Earth are as beautiful as here?”

“I guess. Still, I think I would miss Rose Rock too much.”

“Yes, I suppose in that case...”

Kendra didn't finish her sentence. Her mind felt strangely detached. She and Thomas used to play explorers on the Rock when they were little. Her senses conjured the smell of humid jungle in the greenhouses, the moonlit desert, the orange groves of California. She faintly felt Raymond touch her hand, and exclaim at how cold it was. Dad, the boat heaving into the harbor, the tantalizing tales he brought back from his trips. She barely noticed when Raymond took her pale fingers in his hands to warm them up.

“I'm really glad you're home, you know.”

He was so sincere. It was refreshing. His frank blue-grey eyes glinted in the light of the lighthouse. He gazed at her intently. She met his look for a moment and looked away. If she stayed, she would be giving up her dreams of adventure, her thirst for the unknown. Her eye caught the shadow of a crab scuttling between the black and gray rocks as the last rays of light faded. The tide was going out.

“It's headed toward Bretagne,” she whispered, nodding at the receding waves.

Noël prochain...

The Eyes

Uncle Raphaël's glass tinkled as he stood and tapped it with a spoon. "A toast! To our youngest musicians!"

"To Enidan'Eric!" clamored the family. "To Berklee!"

Eric's stomach roiled. It was all happening too fast. This wasn't what he wanted. But how could he tell them? How could he tell Enid?

In any other family, this would have been a small matter. But the Mounier family loved music. They lived for and breathed music. As descendants of Marie-Rose, founder of Rose Rock and gifted musician, they considered it a proud duty and a passionate delight to keep music alive, rebelling against the regime that had hunted down their ancestors. Any child who could not play and play well by age five was regarded with concern.

Enid and Eric were the best of their generation of cousins. Eric knew it. He and his twin sister were gifted. When they played together, they read each other's minds, innovating classics and modern pieces alike. Since their history revolved around music, they had decided early that their future would too. They would always play together, they knew, as they dreamed up plans of fame, concerts and recording studios.

Enid and Eric had always considered themselves lucky to be twins. Watching their older cousins natter and nag at each other as they grew up, they felt they had gotten the better lot.

The absolute worst scenario, they had established one sleepy afternoon after music practice, was not having any sibling at all. Being alone...the thought made them shudder.

Second worst was having a much older or younger sibling, someone who knew you distantly but not well enough to play with you, someone you only saw on holidays.

Third was having a sibling close in age. Preferably only one or two years, but they had determined that close siblinghood was possible with up to four or five years of difference.

Of course, having a twin was best.

Enid and Eric looked remarkably alike. Apart from the fact that Enid was a girl and Eric a boy, and that they wore her hair and his pants long, they could easily be mistaken for each other. A single physical trait set them apart, a difference that they prided in: their heterochromatic eyes, one blue and one green, were mirror opposites. Around age ten, they had noticed with amusement that they could each only wink their blue eye, giving them the appearance of a flash of sky on an expanse of sea.

Personality-wise, they were quite different. While they could easily, and often did, complete each other's thoughts, Enid liked dance, and Eric liked books. Enid's pertness and quick tongue made her many friends whom Eric was content to share. In fact, Eric wouldn't have minded only ever interacting with his own family and a few chosen others; but Enid liked talking to people, so he adapted.

When the time had come to choose which colleges they would apply to, the twins had long debated the pros and cons of each school, examining with a critical eye which

one would best suit their plans. Juilliard, they concluded, would be best because of its impeccable reputation, outstanding classical program and respected jazz department.

Berklee College of Music in Boston came as a close second in their choice. In fact, Eric knew that Enid preferred it, because their jazz program was reputed to be the best in the country. And Enid loved jazz. Even better, they also offered an excellent Bachelor of Composition, which would suit their duo dreams. Yet, while their classical department was good, it just wasn't Juilliard.

Enid and Eric, Eric and Enid. Both the same yet different.

Until that one, rainy afternoon had changed everything. Eric had been on mailbox duty. They had been trading off surveillance since the beginning of the month, waiting for the letters to arrive. That day, the postman had a letter for them.

Eric rushed into his twin's room brandishing two letters, heart pounding with excitement. The Juilliard answers. The most important event of their lives, typed out on a single sheet of cream-colored paper.

Anxious, hearts racing, Enid and Eric stared into each other's asymmetrical eyes for comfort and, in a silent agreement, opened their letters.

Eric's hands trembled a little as he fumbled with the glued flap of the envelope. The letter was simple and direct. The name of the school printed white over a blue square at the top, a basic "Dear Eric Mounier-Bardeau" greeting...and congratulations on entering Juilliard.

Eric reread the sentence twice, to make sure. The words didn't change. He wasn't dreaming. He...*he*, Eric, had gotten into Juilliard! Rushing along with frantic excitement,

he read through the rest of the letter, delighting in every little phrase that confirmed his acceptance: “if you choose to accept”, “welcome you”, “your Juilliard family”.

“Enid, this is it!” he began, voice quivering with elation, and looked up at her.

His twin had hidden behind a curtain of her dark chestnut hair, but the parts of her face that he could see were drained of blood, her lips drawn tight as she read over her own letter. The hand clutching the envelope had crushed it into a crumpled ball. Enid had been rejected. A sinking feeling wiped the smile off his lips, growing like a pit inside him until suddenly he felt vulgar and disgusted with himself for having been so buoyant only moments prior. Enid was unhappy, and therefore he could not be happy.

“Enid,” he began again, this time gently.

For the first time in living memory, Enid’s eyes refused to meet his own.

“I just...Us both...I really thought...”

She halted and sniffed once. Still not looking at him, she proceeded to methodically straighten out the crumpled envelope and tear it to pieces bit by bit. Eric watched helplessly as his twin, his sister, his first and truest friend, reduced the entire envelope to little more than confetti with mechanical, furious movements. When she started on the letter, he grabbed her wrist to stop her.

“Enid, it’s only mid-March. There’s still Berklee. You like that one better for jazz anyway.”

Her hands paused. “You’re right.”

Her voice was slightly muffled beneath her hair, but he could hear it crack like it did on the rare occasions that she cried. Eric felt the pit inside him deepen. Enid only cried when she was desperately sad or bursting with frustration. Or both.

“You’re right,” she repeated. “I’ll wait and see. And if,” she gulped, “if we don’t get Berklee, I’ll just...I’ll re-apply to Juilliard n-next year.”

Wordlessly, Eric stepped forward and hugged her, knowing what it cost her to say so. If Enid had a vice, it was pride, and she despised “begging to change someone’s mind”. On top of that, such a cruel rejection, oh so cruel when they would accept her other half but not her, could have easily turned her adoration of the school into unadulterated hatred. But because he had gotten in, she also forgave them. A little.

“Worse case,” he joked softly, “I’ll just tell them that I can’t come without you. We’re a package deal, eh?”

He felt her chuckle in his shoulder, and allowed himself a small smile.

The next few days were difficult for Eric. Ordinarily not one to gloat, he wanted nothing more than to tell his arrogant older cousin Mica, his parents, his grand-parents, even his friends about the Juilliard letter. But Enid, although she told him she was happy for him and put on a joking, I-don’t-even-care facade, was miserable, so for her he said nothing. Instead, he stayed with her even more than usual. By a tacit agreement, they abandoned mailbox duty. Instead, when they walked along the serpentine road to school from their house, he tried to cheer her with puns of his own invention and jazz anecdotes. They discussed upcoming gigs, homework, spring and summer vacations, and the new student that Enid had been tutoring (she gave piano lessons on Saturday mornings).

They made plans on the Tuesday with some friends to go see the sunset from the cliff above Salvation Harbor as soon as it was warm enough. They went biking on

Wednesday after classes, something that Enid loved, and he even read her part of his favorite book aloud. Anything to make his twin smile again.

Yet all the while, he couldn't help thinking about the envelope tucked in the drawer of his bedside table, envisioning what might have happened if he had told his parents about it.

His mother would have certainly cried. Mamie Marie would have been ecstatic, because she had taught there. Cousin Yann, Aunt Bérénice-Rose's gifted son, had gone to Juilliard already, but that was all right, because he never gloated, and it was widely accepted that he was a prodigy. He could have shown for once that he, Eric, had equaled Yann's prowess. He could have proven to Mica, who liked to brag about his jazz drumming scholarship at Berklee, that he had surpassed him, that he had even surpassed...Enid.

This last thought surprised him when he first acknowledged it. He had never even considered comparing himself to his twin. Now, it dawned on him that he had rarely done anything differently from her. Sure, he played clarinet and she piano, but they still performed together. He wore pants and she liked skirts, but they still played together. They were so joined at the hip that most people did not even distinguish them as two individuals, and pronounced their names as a single word: Enidan'Eric. The Twins. The Eyes.

That Friday, they walked home with a lighter step. It was the weekend, and more importantly they would be performing at Rose Rock Café that afternoon, before Uncle

Bathélémy's folk band. That, Eric thought, was exactly what Enid needed: a performance to distract her. He told her so, and had her laughing by the time they reached the house.

Stepping through the front door, they dropped off their coats on the iron portmanteau standing in the vestibule, and headed along the hallway toward the back of the house. No sound emerged from the public music room. Their mom's beginner flute class had not started yet.

"Maman?" called Enid, pushing the door open.

Anne-Marie looked up, light hair so like her sister's pulled up in a neat bun, and smiled. Under the attentive eyes of two children who had been dropped off early, she was arranging the black music stands in a semi-circle to face the piano, making sure the distance between each would ensure that her students couldn't accidentally poke each other with their instruments. On the left, wooden shelves covering the wall displayed antiques, in particular a magnificent accordion that had belonged to the Mounier great-great-grandfather, music books, and a collection of instruments. These included a piccolo, guitars, an Irish flute with a rich, wooden sound, a few modern flutes of various design, and half a dozen cases for smaller flutes specifically for children, with a curved neck so that their small fingers would not have to reach too far to press on the keys.

It was in this pile of cases that the two students had originally picked out their practice instruments, of which they were now struggling to assemble the three pieces. Smiling at one of them, a small boy with wispy, white-blond hair, Anne-Marie picked up the neck of his flute and showed him how to align the brand mark on the neck with the first key of the next piece.

“Here,” offered Enid, grabbing the other child’s mouth piece, “I’ll help you with that.”

“By the way,” started their mother, now finished with her student, “I found a few things that might interest you this afternoon.”

“New music scores?” asked Eric with interest, at the same time as Enid exclaimed: “More sheet music?”

He had finished the most recent Debussy book two weeks ago, and was getting tired of transposing his mother’s flute scores from a C to B flat key for his clarinet. Enid, on her part, was getting close to mastering the complete collection of the jazz Rule Book.

“Why don’t you see for yourselves?”

Eyes twinkling, she picked up two folded sheets of paper the twins had not noticed earlier on the grand piano, and handed them over. Eric unfolded his, and was struck dumb for an instant. The Berklee letter. Glancing over at Enid, he noticed she, too, stood frozen.

“I can’t believe I actually reached the mailbox faster than you today,” Maman admitted with a grin. “I was so tempted, I took them out of the envelope, but I didn’t want to read them before you. So, what do they say?”

Enid stared at her brother, blue and green eyes wide, and within them he saw reflected the same worried question he had: *had the other gotten in?*

Not detaching their eyes from each other, they nodded once. Identical grins broke over their solemn expressions as a wave of numbing relief washed over Eric. It was all right. They were in.

Still wearing what he felt was a stupid-happy expression, Eric handed the opened letter to his mother. After glancing over it, she gave Enid a questioning glance, which Enid answered with a wide grin. And Maman, always so poised, so collected, did a very undistinguished thing: she shrieked. Taken aback, Eric stared as his mother jumped up and down a few times, loosening her bun, and rushed over to crush them against her, clutching the letter in her hand:

“I’m so *proud* of you! My little ones, at Berklee! Oh, mes chéris, well done!”

“Um, Maman...”

“...We can’t breathe...”

“...Please...”

Letting go of them, she sniffed and dabbed at her eyes.

“I can’t wait to tell your father, he’ll be so glad! And Mamie, and everyone else, too! Of course, we have to wait for the other schools’ answers before you make a decision, but...”

“Oh no, Maman!” Enid blurted, “We want Berklee. It’s the best school after all!”

Eric’s stomach flopped, making him queasy. *He* didn’t want Berklee. For the first time, he noticed it bothered him that Enid was taking the decision for both of them. As he was about to object, the doorbell rang, signaling the arrival of the other students. Maman wiped a few more tears away and went to answer it, calling over her shoulder:

“Why don’t you call Mamie right now and tell her?”

No homework happened that afternoon. After their early performance at the Café, which glided by smoother than butter, Enid and Eric headed home with their parents to

prepare the evening. They were to meet with the rest of their family for an impromptu celebration dinner. Mamie Marie had her silverware for grand occasions out, and was picking up a cake at Rose Rock Bakery for her youngest grandchildren. Those cousins who were around were coming by with champagne and congratulations. Cousin Rosalie, nicknamed Lili since her pigtail days, was even driving up from Portland where she worked at the Portland Music Conservatory. Somehow, Eric couldn't get excited.

Once his dress shirt removed, Eric flopped onto the dark blue cover of his bed. Eyes closed against the afternoon sunlight filtering through a crack in his curtains, he pondered the question that had been growing in his mind for two weeks: what if he said yes to *Juilliard*?

This was a possibility. He had not considered it a valid one before, but there it was. If he went, he would experience a big, bright hubbub of life, waking up in a city that doesn't sleep. And, for the first time, he would be alone. Eric was surprised to find that the thought did not bother him. On the contrary, the more he thought about it, the more the idea intrigued him. What would it be like out there, on his own? Not forever, of course. Just for a little while. But he might have his own friends, instead of sharing Enid's. People he met would exclaim at his heterochromia, but they wouldn't gush about how similar he looked compared to her, they wouldn't say: "how funny, you're mirror opposites", or "look, it's the twins!" They would just see Eric. For once, he would be doing something for himself. It was both terrifying and exhilarating.

And yet...*what would Enid say*, asked the small, annoying voice at the back of his mind. His twin wouldn't understand. Eric could imagine the betrayal in Enid's eyes when he told her.

But he had to do it. The more he thought about it, the surer he felt about his decision. He wanted New York. He wanted Juilliard. Maybe more than he had ever wanted anything before. And, more importantly, he wanted to do it *by himself*. Without Enid's shadow hiding him. He wanted to be recognized as a whole instead of a half. And how great it would be, for once, not having everything multiplied by two!

But how would he tell Enid?

Enid, I've been thinking, Berklee was actually more your choice than mine and I...no that was stupid.

Enid, we could try to attend different colleges. It might be enriching for us as musicians. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger. That just sounded cheesy. And why was he quoting a Kelly Clarkson song?

Eric sighed. He was terrible at convincing people with logical arguments. It was so much easier to communicate emotion through his clarinet. Maybe he could play her a song?

A knock on the door interrupted his musings.

"Eric? Are you coming down?"

Enid.

"I'll be right there," he replied, swinging his legs out. The door opened, and his twin, poking her head in, beamed at him.

"I'm amazed you can lie down. I'm so excited I can barely sit still!"

"Actually I was thinking about that..."

But Enid, who wasn't paying attention, kept going:

“I can’t wait to go, can you imagine, the cool professors, other musicians, and our very own living space in Boston, I mean I’m nervous of course, but...”

“Enid, listen,” began Eric.

The stream of words paused and their mirrored eyes met. Enid frowned, and her smile faded.

“What’s wrong? You look worried. We’ll do great, you know.” Her voice took a more anxious tone. “And I know the classical program isn’t your favorite, but I’m sure you’ll learn a lot.”

The concern on her face shook him. Clearly the issue of an “only second best” classical program for him had been bothering her. Eric felt disgusted with himself. Enid, the person who cared most about him in the world, had been worrying about him when he was considering abandoning her. What was wrong with him? He forced a smile on his lips.

“You’re right, we *will* do great. And I bet I can bully some professor into giving me extra lessons if things aren’t challenging enough.”

“You bully someone?” Enid’s voice was teasing now. “You would probably just guilt-trip them into helping you with your sad puppy eyes.”

“Hey, I can be intimidating!”

He grimaced a face at her, and Enid smirked.

“If you make that face at breakfast you *might* curdle the milk in your cereal bowl.”

He threw a pillow at her and she ducked, running off into the hallway with a peal of laughter.

“Our faces are the same, genius!” he shouted after her. She only laughed harder, and he felt annoyed. Had she always treated him like he was weaker?

Standing, Eric made his way to the bathroom to take a quick shower before dinner. As he toweled his short hair dry, the fog gradually lifted from the top half of the mirror, and he found his reflection in the glass. His face looked like a phantom in the bathroom’s white light. Suddenly fearful of what he might find, he examined himself. This was Eric. Classical clarinetist. But as he stared through the vapor, his face turned into Enid’s. Marie-Rose musician. Twin. Half. So many broad categories in which they both fit. Was it wrong to want a single category for himself?

He should discuss it with someone. With Enid. With his parents. And he had to do it soon. This solitary line of thinking was driving him around in circles like a merry-go-round inside his own head.

He would talk to Enid. They had never hidden anything from one another before. She would be hurt, but in the end she would understand.

As the afternoon wore on, however, Eric found it increasingly difficult to bring anything up. Enid raced around the house in a happy whirlwind of activity, trying to plan the coming months. Any half-hearted attempt he made drowned in her frenzy. Had he not been so fretful, he might have found it funny, but as it was, her actions irritated him. Why couldn’t she just sit still? It was like she was deliberately avoiding a serious conversation. Eric knew he was working it up in his head, that his sister was just eager for college, but it still bugged him. She was so excited she kept picking up one thing, dropping it and rushing on to another one. When she stopped midway through a piano piece for the fifth

time, their mother finally sat her down to prepare green peas for the dinner at Mamie Marie's. The task left Enid humming and hopping with restrained energy, but kept her in one place.

As Eric tried to broach the topic, however, his mother, probably expecting the same restless energy, sent him to get groceries. He left, grumbling, and grabbed his blue bike to head into town. As he pulled the handle, the left pedal got caught in the chains of Enid's green one. Eric tugged at it in frustration. Typical. Even Enid's possessions were trying to hold him back. With a violent shove, he yanked his bike free.

As he zoomed along the streets, Eric took a deep, calming breath. He was being unfair, blaming her like that. It wasn't Enid's fault that she hadn't gotten into Juilliard. It wasn't her fault that he wanted to do something for himself. If anything, he was to blame for never saying so. Enid was behaving the way she always had, and including him in her plans the way she always did. Now, if he wanted something different, he had to tell her. She would be sad, angry maybe, but she would understand. Eventually.

When he returned, however, his family was busy preparing for the evening. When he tried to talk to Enid, his twin dragged him into a last minute rehearsal of "Just the Two of Us" instead.

"Enid, I'm trying to say something!" he finally barked.

"We can talk on the way," muttered Enid without detaching her fingers from the keyboard. Her eyes scintillated with the manic, passionate fire of performance, and he knew she would be deaf to anything else until she got the piece just right. Aggravated at her and at himself, he resolved to tell his parents.

“Put on a clean shirt, *chéri*,” replied his mom with a distracted smile, hands in the quiche crust dough, when he tried to talk to her.

“We’re already late, so we can talk about it there, alright?” was his dad’s answer.

The problem was, Eric realized as the family walked over to his grandmother’s house, burdened with food and a bottle of wine, that he wasn’t actually really making a real effort to tell them. It was so much safer to let everything flow the way it was. His announcement would send them all in another kind of frenzy, one he wasn’t sure he wanted to see, so he was holding back. Exasperated with himself, Eric pledged that he would tell them tonight.

Of course, it was never that easy. At their grandmother’s house, Auntie Bérénice-Rose placed the twins at the center of the group when they stepped into the living room, barely giving them the time to pull out their instruments.

Eric knew they were rarely so happy. Taking in his cheerful family, each at their own instrument and joining in to sing the harmonies for the choruses, and the radiant face of Enid behind the old, wooden piano, cheeks flushed with the twinkling of the lights reflected on the ivory keys, he knew he should feel perfectly fulfilled. And yet...

And yet the painful twinge deep within him only kept growing. Berklee had been Enid’s choice. It did not have the best classical music program. Juilliard did. Worse, no one knew he had gotten into Juilliard because he had not told anyone. But Juilliard was what he wanted. Why couldn’t he just say so?

He felt even more constrained as his uncle clapped him on the back with a roar of congratulations, as Yann brought up his own wonderful experience at Juilliard, and

during dinner, as Mica added yet another snide comment on his own superiority at Berklee.

Uncle Raphaël's glass tinkled as he stood and tapped it with a spoon. "A toast! To our youngest musicians!"

"To Enidan'Eric!" clamored the family. "To Berklee!"

"I'm...I'm going to Juilliard."

The words rose like ice cubes through Eric's throat and tumbled out of his mouth, leaving his lips numb. The dining room went silent. His parents exchanged a glance he could not interpret, while his cousins, glasses raised, only stared. But Eric was most worried about Enid. He did not dare turn his head to face her, but he could feel her eyes boring through him. Interrogating, disbelieving, raging. Maybe he should have waited until after dinner to make his announcement. Or at least after the toast.

The silence stretched on. He could see everyone weighing his words, tasting them, wondering at them. Yet again, Eric wished he were more comfortable with crowds. Or more charismatic, like Enid was. Enid could have put everyone at ease with a few words and a well-placed chuckle. Right now, it felt like his family had decided to perform John Cage's "Four minutes thirty three seconds of silence" without warning him. And it was not pleasant at all.

"What do you mean, *fiston*?" Uncle Raphaël finally asked.

His mother's brother, tall and curly-haired, had always had laughter in his eyes. Now, his brushy eyebrows were raised over a black, unfamiliar gaze.

Eric prayed Mamie would hurry and bring out the pie. The stares were making him uncomfortable. He cleared his throat.

“Well, I got in. So, um, I’m going.”

The phrase felt lame and pitiful as it flopped about the room like a fish out of water.

“You didn’t get into Juilliard,” interjected Mica with a snigger. His tall frame, broad-shouldered and muscular from drumming every day, stretched over his chair, making a shadow on the wooden table. “You and Enid got Berklee. Isn’t that what we’re celebrating?”

“Yes,” Eric hurried to agree, feeling the floor crumble beneath his vocal footing as other cousins muttered in agreement, “Yes we did, I mean, we are, but that is, I um...I also got Juilliard and...”

“Then why didn’t you say so earlier?” retorted calm-tempered Yann.

“I...” Eric fell silent. An instinctive part of him screamed that it was wrong to betray Enid’s secret, the one that had kept her moody and miserable for the past two weeks.

The kitchen door swung open and Mamie Marie stepped in, back tall and hands steady as she carried a superb apricot tart and placed it in the middle of the table.

“Eat it while it’s hot!” she chanted, putting the oven mittens down by her plate and tucking back a single strand of white hair that had escaped from her otherwise flawless bun.

Enid stood.

“Sorry Mamie, I think I lost my appetite.”

Shoving her chair back under the table, she turned around and strode out of the room, dark hair waving like a protective curtain in her back. Mamie Marie's eyebrows rose up to her hairline as she surveyed the rest of her children and grandchildren.

"Explain to me what just happened," she ordered in her imperious, opera cantatrice tone.

As Lili launched into a dramatic retelling of the past few minutes, Eric's heart took a dive through the carpet. He wished now that he had told his twin earlier. That he had warned her of his decision. It had just never seemed like the right time. And now Enid was gone.

Not quite how he had planned it.

Blueberry Muffins

“Honestly, my darlings! We covered this in eighth grade!”

Emma grimaced, and lowered her head along with the others as the cold, radio-static voice rose and whipped at them in an angry pitch. She definitely did not remember studying the Berlin Wall. From the looks on her cowering classmates’ faces, neither did they. Sneaking a glance at her teacher from beneath her bangs, Emma shivered. In all fairness, eighth grade had been a whole three years ago. But it was no use arguing. Mrs. Leberre would not care.

Standing at the front of the classroom wrapped in one of her brownish shawls, the impatient matron glared at them out of red-rimmed eyes that hovered over puffy, droopy folds of skin. Her floppy cheeks quivered with indignation. With an angry sniff, she stalked back to her desk and dropped down on her chair, a hand to her heart, still glaring at them from under her too dark, curly brown hair as though each and every one of them was to be blamed for Sebastian not remembering the year of Churchill’s speech.

Mrs. Anika Leberre was not a nice teacher. Her AP world history classes were horribly difficult, and sprinkled with extra essays and presentations for every class mistake. For as long as Emma could remember, she had been notorious for never softening, or mitigating the punishing pace. Hand an assignment in late, or forget to put your name on a test, and you received an automatic zero. No discussion or pleading, just a bitter bagel at the top right corner of the paper that you had to choke down. Forgiveness was a serious pedagogical character flaw in her view. She said herself that the only thing worse than not knowing the right answer was giving excuses for your ignorance. To

students, Mrs. Leberre was a legend, in the sense that the dragon Smaug was: something to whisper about on dark nights to frighten the younger kids. Still, one good thing could be said about her, thought Emma as she rushed to take notes on the Iron Curtain: Mrs. Leberre made you learn.

When the bell rang, Emma stuffed everything into her backpack and escaped the classroom with relief. Friday. She was almost home for the weekend. She merged into the crush of students that carried her down the hallway toward her locker. As she entered the combination to open it, her friend Jackie caught her by the shoulders, extricating herself from of the swelling current of people.

“So?” she asked, jet-black curls bouncing around her sweet, open face. “How was the dragon?”

“You shouldn’t call her that! She might hear you.”

Jackie rolled her eyes. “But *everyone* calls her that. She’s bound to have heard it by now.”

“Just because everyone does it, doesn’t mean we have to.”

“Oh all right, fine!” tittered Jackie, eyes twinkling. “How was *Leberre*?”

Emma, still fumbling with her locker code, groaned in mock pain. “The usual. She got roaring angry at Sebastian for messing up a date, and found a way to assign extra homework. So now we have an essay due next Friday on top of the regular DBQs.”

“Wait, I thought you were done with the Document Based Questions?”

“I thought so too,” replied Emma glumly, “but she decided we need more practice. At this rate, I’ll be doing them in my sleep.”

Jackie shook her head in sympathetic appall: “She’s gonna kill you, Em.” Patting her friend’s arm, she added: “You should have taken AP U.S. history with me. I know they told us it doesn’t look as good for college and all, but at least I’ll get an A in the class.”

“I know,” muttered Emma, shaking her head. “But I *like* AP world history. I thought if I tried, she couldn’t possibly be as bad as everyone says.”

“No way! Her dragon reputation is older than what she teaches. It has to be based on truth. She’s totally...”

But Emma wasn’t listening. Having finally opened her locker and unzipped her school bag, she realized her pencil case was missing. “Where did it go?” she interrupted with dismay. “I had it just now!”

Peering over her shoulder, Jackie examined the depths of the bag. “You must have left it in class. Go check, I’ll wait for you if you want.”

“What if Leberre is still there?” Emma groaned.

“I bet she’ll try to give you extra homework for being ‘careless with your possessions,’” answered Jackie with a laugh.

“Thanks, that really helps.”

“Just go,” encouraged Jackie, pushing her toward the classroom. “She doesn’t really spit fire.”

Dragging her feet, Emma headed back. She wasn’t worried about getting extra homework. Not really. A straight-A student, she had yet to draw any complaints from Mrs. Leberre. But the more she thought of bearing the full impact of Leberre’s malevolent eyes and thunderous voice alone, the more her heart raced. This teacher made

hulking football players like Benjamin collapse into quivering blobs of blubber. She could see the title of the school newspaper from here:

SCHOOL DRAGON CLAIMS NEW VICTIM

Early last lunch, disaster struck the somewhat peaceful community of Rose Rock High. Emma Laurier, an auburn-haired and hazel-eyed eleventh grader, fell prey to the incendiary voice of Mrs. Leberre, the infamously terrifying teacher. Emma, whose only crimes were of the foody and forgetful nature, returned to the empty classroom to retrieve her blue and green pencil case. There, she encountered what is commonly referred to as “the dragon’s roar” and fell speechless to the ground.

Emma shivered. Reaching the door of the dreaded classroom, she peeked through the window and suddenly found it hard to swallow.

Mrs. Leberre was perched at her desk like some impatient fire-breathing lizard on its mountain, preparing to devour the flesh of its next victim.

But the school nemesis was doing a highly un-dragon-like thing: unwrapping a muffin. Blueberry, judging by the spots. But this wasn’t just any muffin. Squinting, Emma recognized the Rose Rock Bakery’s stylized emblem decorating the top of the pastel pink box that lay, wide open, on the desk. They made the best desserts on the island. She knew only too well.

But since when did dragons like sweets?

And, more importantly, *was it safe to interrupt?*

Unaware of the debate raging outside her door, Mrs. Leberre had finished removing the paper wrapping surrounding the bottom of the muffin. With a delicacy her students would have been astounded to see from the fingers that launched whiteboard markers at them with deadly accuracy, she broke a small, crumbling piece from the top and put it in her mouth.

And, lo and behold, she *smiled*.

Emma stared in disbelief. This was history in the making. Not the old dead guys splashed across the pages of her history book, but the real “call a cameraman and CNN” stuff. No one had ever seen Mrs. Leberre smile. In class, when she wasn’t speaking, her mouth remained frozen in a perpetual grimace of disapproval. Emma steeled her nerves. A happy dragon would be less likely to eat her, right? Cautiously, she knocked on the door, and slipped in.

“Um, Mrs. Leberre? I’m sorry, I forgot my pencil case, and...”

“Check your desk then, my darling,” interrupted the teacher with a frown, “You should be more careful with your possessions, you know.”

“Yes, Mrs. Leberre.”

Emma found the pencil case on the ground near her desk. It must have slipped out of her backpack. She waved it at Mrs. Leberre, who was now busy detaching another piece of her muffin: “Found it!”

“Get back to lunch, then,” replied the teacher, voice crackling into a high register. “Go on, shoo!”

Emma headed back to the door, but had a sudden idea, and turned, taking a deep breath. “I really like Rose Rock Bakery, too. The chocolate muffins are my favorite.”

Startled, Mrs. Leberre looked up at her with her mouth slightly open, seeming at a loss. Emma, already regretting her impulsive decision, hastily retreated to the door.

“See you tomorrow,” she told her teacher. As she exited, she heard the whisper of a belated answer:

“Chocolate is...good, too.”

Emma smiled. The dragon had a sweet fang.

The bell rang, marking the end of the day, and students poured out of the school double doors and into the courtyard in a rush of overcoats and woolen scarves. Chattering voices rose under the two great oak trees, discussing weekend plans. Emma, following her classmates out, paused by the bus stop and waited for Jackie to finish Spanish class, shivering in the chilly October wind. The teacher always kept them late. When her friend emerged, they exchanged a smile and headed home at a brisk pace. It was their ritual, an age-old tradition to walk to Jackie’s for a snack and homework until Emma’s mom finished work at the travel agency and came by for her daughter and tea. Over the years, their route had grown a few side trails, to go pet Mrs. Marlot’s tabby cats across the street and pick up younger siblings at the neighboring elementary and middle schools.

That afternoon, Emma pulled out the Document Based Questions that Mrs. Leberre had assigned, and began reading a text about the German Democratic Republic. Soon, however, she realized she had been reading the same line about Soviet Berlin over and over, and that her mind was somewhere else entirely.

Why was Mrs. Leberre so mean to her students? This was a question she had never thought to ask herself. After all, as much as Emma liked the stories, she knew Mrs.

Leberre couldn't have just sprouted from the ground one day as a grumpy, pen-throwing old hag. She must have been more normal when the school had hired her, at least. So why had she changed? And the way she had reacted to Emma's comment, as though she wasn't used to speaking to students about something other than coursework...Come to think of it, Emma had barely ever seen the teacher interact with anyone outside of class. The students feared and avoided her, the staff seemed nervous around her, and the other professors barely spoke to her. Did she have family? Maybe friends outside of school?

Her teacher was definitely interesting, Emma decided. No one would be suspicious if she asked discreet questions around town. And, who knew? Maybe after a while, she might find out how many blueberry muffins it took to tame the dragon.

Anika Leberre pushed the front door closed, leaned against it, and sighed. She had walked home slowly today, so why did she feel so tired? It was those kids, she decided, slowly driving her insane. How was anyone supposed to stay calm and keep teaching when these insubordinate little monkeys ran their insolent mouths at her all day?

Dragging herself to the kitchen, she turned on the lights and roughly dropped her bag. Her AP World History textbook tumbled out onto tiles so grimy it was hard to tell what color they had originally been, and she grunted. That AP class was easily the worst she had taught in a while. Possibly even the worst she had ever taught. Those kids could not be bothered with doing the readings and handing in assignments on time. Was it really her fault she had to assign the extra essay? She knew she was conveniently forgetting that she had said so of the last nine years, but it felt nice all the same. Blaming someone.

She headed to the oak cabinet that Rick had built and pulled out a bottle. Swishing its content around once or twice, she frowned. Only about half the bottle left of gin. She really shouldn't have any. She should just grade the last homework assignment, then take her pills, which of course she couldn't mix with alcohol, and go to bed. But just a little couldn't hurt after the day she'd had. Besides, it was Friday. She could skip the pills this once. Pouring herself a generous amount in a glass, the only one drying by the sink, she slowly walked back to the table and sat, sipping.

She just felt so disconnected from her teaching. No matter what she did and how she approached it, some students failed and others improved, and more often than not the ones who failed were the ones refusing to pay attention. Early in her career, she had tried to encourage those students, giving them easier assignments and helping them after class, but how could you convince a teen who was certain he was right that world history mattered for his future? It was painfully difficult to stay involved when it seemed some higher power (and the teens' obstinate minds) had already decided whether they would succeed or not.

For the past nine years, she had weighed retirement in her mind, every time a student talked back at her or failed yet another essay, and every time the administrative staff muttered behind her back about "unfair tenure". But every time, she chose to stay. Not only because she was dedicated to education; but, because she knew, deep within herself, that it was the only thing still forcing her afloat.

If only Rick were here. She would rant to him about it and he would tell her not to worry, she was doing a great job. Well, Rick-of-the-past might have consoled her. They had met in New York, as she worked on her history masters, and he passed his captain

examinations to sail passenger ships. After their marriage, she had turned what could have been a PhD into a teaching license, and happily followed him to Rose Rock, his hometown. He had stayed at home as much as possible, only accepting trips that would take him away for less than two weeks. She had been so proud of him then, captain of a 200-foot schooner so young, yet sacrificing advances in his career to spend more time with her. He used to craft her wooden furniture for Christmas and make her laugh, with a smile that crinkled his beard at the corners. But nine years ago it had all gone downhill. No, Rick-of-today, who slept in their son Thomas' old bedroom and imposed a cold civility on their interactions, wouldn't console her. He would laugh at her, or tell her with a frown to "take it easy" on her students.

If he were here at all, that is.

Frowning at the humid depth of her empty glass, Anika stood and headed once more for the oak cabinet, pulling her shawl tight around her. These memories really needed something to wash them down. She shuffled past shelves of neatly aligned spice bottles grey with dust. Rick loved spices, not her. He put hot sauce and foreign-sounding flavorings in every dish.

Her first years in Rose Rock, she had been, as she liked to tell herself, young and idealistic. She had fallen in love with the town's historical charm. Its rich tradition of a shipwreck fleeing from France had swept away her imagination. Back then, the slow-paced lifestyle and kind-hearted people had seduced her. As a young teacher, she had worked herself up to produce ever-improving results, teaching her students college-level writing in their history essays. From the first, some pleased parents had convinced the administration to let her teach classes her way despite complaints. Her students may have

feared her methods, but they thanked her for excellent writing skills and work ethic once they reached college.

It felt like she was settled. Like she belonged. But she heard her colleagues mutter when, as a young outsider, she secured tenure. And she found she couldn't really share the history of most families here, not even of her own in-laws. She couldn't even share Rick's travels, stuck at home with her job and Thomas and Kendra.

Then, Rick had taken that long trip. A job that, he promised her, would guarantee him a great bonus and jump-start savings for their kids' future college education. He had been gone for four months, and returned with a sunny tan, sunnier smile, and a brass compass for her, an antique he had hunted down in the old port of San Juan in Puerto Rico. She had loved to use it to orient her path to school and back. But that had quickly gotten boring, and she had tossed it on a shelf to gather dust. After all, what else could she do with a compass? She wasn't going anywhere.

That trip had spurred Thomas and Kendra's young imaginations with tales of foreign places and incredible adventures at sea. Rick had begun taking the kids on trips around the island on weekends, laughing off her concerns about unfinished homework. To show her disapproval, she had refused to accompany them. Preparing her classes, seething, she had wondered what it was that made them so carefree. The three of them, unlike her, had no academic ambition, she had concluded. It was a failure on their part, and she had felt disappointed in her own children.

Reaching for the lower door of the cabinet, Anika now averted her eyes from the cracked picture frame that huddled next to the compass on a shelf. The three of them were there, she knew, smiling at her insolently between the broken edges of the glass.

She had taken that picture right after their return from a weekend trip, all three of them sweaty and salt-stained but grinning. They had caught a dogfish, she recalled now, because little Thomas had spent hours drawing it instead of working on his history homework. That a toothy, slimy shark could interest her son more than revolutions was a mystery to Anika, and she had confiscated the colored pencils until the homework was done. Even then, Thomas' worksheet had been punctuated with scribbles of fins and fishtails. Why did her children resist her like that? That trip, she saw now, had marked the beginning of her isolation.

Draining her glass, Anika poured herself another. A film of sweat grew on her forehead as she recalled that day two years ago, when she had badgered Thomas to come visit, and he, in a mature voice she had not recognized, had told her, Anika – Anika? Why didn't he call her Mom? - they were grown up now, and he and Kendra wanted to live their own lives, preferably in Boston or California. And given the past, she couldn't expect them to come visit. Besides, his wife – he had a wife? – yes, his wife was expecting and she couldn't travel, hadn't Dad told her?

When her son had hung up she had thrown the picture at the wall. Clearly, they had abandoned her. They didn't care that she had apologized over and over again, that she had been working hard on...everything. How dared they? And they did come back to Rose Rock. Rick had admitted a few months ago that Kendra had returned for a month after a divorce. Kendra had been here, in the same town, and she hadn't told her. And no one, *no one* in Rose Rock had bothered to tell her either. The whole town was against her.

Anika picked at the issue like a fresh scab, even knowing how much it hurt. How had she not seen her own daughter when she had been right there? Kendra had become

just like Rick, fleeting, sunny, and untrustworthy. The girl had never bothered with academics, and now just look, she was in tech, Rick had said! Anika wasn't even sure what that meant, but the very word sounded offensive.

When Rick wouldn't tell her where her daughter was now, now matter how hard she pried, she'd lost control and shrieked at him for keeping her from her children, how dare he, that monster? He was setting them against her again, wasn't he, trying to keep them to himself! Rick had sailed the very next morning for Panama and hadn't returned since. But she didn't care anymore. Good riddance, the lot of them.

She had drained her glass again. The bottle was empty, so she groped for the rum at the back. Pulling it out, she tried to open it once, twice, and, cursing her jittery fingers, finally managed to wrench it open. Not bothering with the glass, she took a long gulp straight from the bottle, and felt better.

As she tottered back to the table, her foot caught on something and she fell. The open bottle she was clutching sloshed, and some of the precious liquid poured onto the floor, making a neat, clear pool on the grimy tiles. Furious at the waste, she looked down. It was that shipwrecking World History book! She got herself back up, cursing and kicking it. These shipwrecking kids! It was their fault she was drinking again! If they weren't so shipwrecking stubborn, she wouldn't be here trying to drink herself into a shipwreck! But children were ungrateful, no matter how much she had sacrificed for them. She could have had a brilliant academic career, and how did they repay her? By running away!

Ranting out loud now, she rocked on her heels and took another swig, and then another. More cold sweat started to run down her back. Why was she sweating? A wave

of dizziness overcame her. She fell against the nearest chair and held on tightly to the wooden frame.

Her roaming, blurred vision found the broken portrait, but instead of Rick and the children, the pale face of an auburn-haired girl formed on it. That girl...what was her name, Emma...she liked muffins. Vanilla? No, chocolate. She was smart, talented in fact. She said she liked muffins too. And the bakery. Rose...Rose Rock Bakery. And...muffins.

Standing again, Anika put down the bottle and reached for the sink. She got there just in time. Her heaving was short and her throw up abundant. Trembling, she lifted the sink plug and turning on the water faucet to wash her hands, face and mouth.

Next time, she would tell that Emma girl that she hadn't tried the chocolate muffins in a while. Yes, that would be a good start to a conversation. She could encourage *her*, give her the chances Kendra had rejected. Maybe even...but no, she wouldn't think about it too much.

She really should get some work done. Picking up her glass, she filled it with tap water, then grabbed a pile of papers from her bag. As she sat to grade her senior class' exams, Anika, for the first time in a long while, felt hopeful.

The last leaves of November flew off on icy December winds, and Emma wondered at how strangely life turned. At the beginning of the year, if anyone had told her that she would be friendly with the dragon-lady, she would have laughed herself sick.

Now, she thought back on the Tuesday after the muffin scene, when her teacher had awkwardly told her she hadn't tried the chocolate ones in a while, and they had

ended up having a lengthy, if patchy, conversation about the pros and cons of baking muffins directly into the paper wrappings. She had started walking home with Mrs. Leberre after noticing she always left alone, and after a start filled with awkward pauses they had ended up chatting about ancient Rome. This had befuddled Jackie, who couldn't understand why Emma now chose to walk home with the dragon instead of her on every other day.

Even more confusing to Jackie was the fact that Mrs. Leroux, her mom and the town baker, approved. She had even given Emma a few extra cupcakes to share with Mrs. Leberre one day, fussing that the poor dear didn't look like she did much for herself, and congratulated Emma on being so kind. Emma had felt herself turn red with pleasure at the compliment. It was true she was doing a good deed. Maybe, in future generations, the students' tales would include her as the high school hero who had tamed the dragon. They would recall how, using muffins as bait, valiant Emma had taught the dragon to be friendly, and helped her banish her inner demons.

Because it wasn't really Mrs. Leberre's fault, she had realized. The more she learned about her teacher's mysteriously lonely life, the sadder she felt for her. Mrs. Marlot, whom she had talked to, had whispered that her husband was away a lot. Mrs. Leroux saw that she only ever ordered a single muffin at the bakery. Mr. Henri had remarked that she never came by to chat anymore now that her kids were gone. He had also mentioned that she had been much cheerier when she had first arrived, asking him about the history of the town and playing with his son. No one Emma had asked seemed to think she had any friends. Emma felt terrible for her. That life sounded so lonely.

Emma's parents may have worked a lot, but at least they were *there*, cooking dinner, helping with math homework and taking pictures at birthdays, piano recitals and soccer games. Her sister Catherine was away for university, but she called every weekend, and came home on holidays. She also recalled the first time Mrs. Leberre had laughed at her jokes, a bit unsteadily, and how she had thought her teacher did not seem to remember exactly how to laugh.

Now, they took their time walking back from school, often chatting about one world history topic or other. Mrs. Leberre clearly cared. Once Emma grew bold enough to ask questions, she lit up, and started coaching her in what she called "the subtleties of history". She would go on long diatribes about how historians misunderstood Alfred the Great and criticize supposed patterns in empires' rises and falls. Emma would make a great historian, Mrs. Leberre even stated once. Wouldn't she consider a career in historical research? She could recommend a few great colleges for that. The compliment had left Emma glowing with pride.

Emma also saw how Mrs. Leberre now actually gave a tentative half smile to students before starting class, and wished them a good afternoon and a good weekend when they left. Most of her classmates welcomed the change with relief, but a few were spooked, jumping when she addressed them and sitting at the edge of their seats in their desperation to reach the door faster, acting as though Mrs. Leberre's suspicious kindness were a cover for some master plan of draconian design. When she refrained from assigning the usual extra essay one Friday, some of them actually froze in shocked disbelief, mouths gaping and eyes wide. She then snapped at them in her radio static voice to shut their yaps if they didn't want to perpetually look like fish, confirming their

belief that the dragon was only sleeping. But for Mrs. Leberre, this much change was a revolution.

Who knew, thought Emma with satisfaction as she wrote down the reduced homework load for the following week, who knew.

As Anika Leberre walked home, her book bag did not seem to weigh as much as usual, even though on Fridays she always carried the eleventh grade DBQs and essays to grade. She knew little Emma would probably get an A, and the thought cheered her. That girl had potential. Passionate, smart, and ambitious, just like herself. She would definitely have a great academic career. Maybe even a professorship in a famous university. Before that of course, she had to go to college. Anika would start working on it with her on Monday.

Anika pulled her wool scarf closer around her chin. It was getting cold, and while the first snows on their way from Canada were not scheduled for another few weeks, the wind bit more savagely as the days neared Christmas.

Strangely enough, she could not wait for the snow this year. True, she would have to walk to school in it every morning, but it would look so pretty, Mrs. Marlot's holly bushes in red and green, and Espérance Plaza covered in a white blanket, with the Rose Rock Café sign polished silver at one end and colorful fairy lights glittering all around. They would start selling pralines outside the bakeries, warm and fragrant in their paper cones, and the Mounier would organize volunteer choirs with all the traditional Rose Rock songs on the weekends before the holidays. Fife Place would slowly grow its little Christmas market, the old France kind that brought tourists, with mulled wine.

Anika nodded as Mr. Henri trod by, bundled up against the cold and accompanied by his bounding red and white husky dog, which had never needed a leash for as long as anyone could remember. He risked pulling a gloved hand out of his coat pocket to wave, and kept heading toward the beach. Mr. Henri was famous for the treasures he collected from the rocks of Neptune Cove. Standing behind the driftwood counter of the Treasure Trove, his part-bar, part-antique shop, he swore up and down that they were remains of the original shipwreck.

Didn't he have a son? Anika recalled a serious boy with glasses and a blond bowl cut who used to play with Thomas at Seaside Park. He now worked at the library archives and helped his father out at the shop on weekends. How did Anika know this? She didn't remember. It had been years since she had talked to Mr. Henri about town history, let alone about his son. He and his wife Marguerite had been some of her closest friends when she had first arrived. They had invited her on walks, and had organized dinners once a week at the Treasure Trove, where Mr. Henri always ended up showing his discoveries. But after a while she had felt that they, like the rest of the town, gossiped about her behind her back, and had cut connections. Maybe Rick had told her about the boy.

Thinking of Rick once more, she shrugged. He might still come home for the holidays. And then they might talk, *really* talk, again. She knew she shouldn't get her hopes up, since he hadn't bothered last year. But they had never divorced, so he must still care. He also returned once in a while to check up on her and take away whatever alcohol he could find. After all, she was doing better now. She had left him a voicemail after her doctor's appointment last week to tell him so. Her doctor had been impressed that she had

showed up this time, and had praised her when she had told him that she hadn't had any more gin, and barely any rum, in three weeks. He had said she was showing "definite improvement".

And besides, Sunday was her birthday. Rick would call, and she would get to talk to him. Tell him she was taking the doctor very seriously. That she was chatting with the baker again. And if Rick didn't call, surely Thomas or Kendra would. Of course, they hadn't called in years, but once they heard how much she had improved from Rick (because she knew they still talked about her), they would. They would see she could change. She grinned.

On Sunday morning, Anika Leberre woke up to the sound of silence. Allowing herself a minute under her comforter to fully wake up, she gazed at the ceiling. The wooden beams raced each other from wall to wall, tracing neat chestnut roads across the faded, chipped paint. She really should get it touched up. The realtor had told Rick and her that the visible beams were traditional of old French country homes when they had bought the house, but although they gave the bedroom a rustic charm, she now wished the ribcages of her house were not visible, if only to make the painting job easier.

Turning to her side, she glanced at her alarm clock. The red electric numbers flashed eleven fifteen. A childlike thrill raced through her. It had been her birthday for almost twelve hours.

She rarely slept in so late now that the children were gone. Finally getting out of bed, she stretched, wrapped herself in her bathrobe and headed for a long shower.

When she stepped out of the steamy bathroom, she toweled her short curls dry and took a good look at herself in the mirror hanging from the door. She seemed different. Oh, the skin of her cheeks still flopped like a bulldog's, but her eyes held a brighter, healthier glow she couldn't name. She stood a little straighter and smiled at herself. The doctor was right. She had "definitely improved".

She dressed with a hum on her lips, drank a glass of water, and hurried through the kitchen to nibble on a piece of bagel before slipping on her coat and gloves. She would run to the bakery and pick up something for herself. Out the door she went, nervous at the idea that they might call while she was out. But no, they usually slept in on weekends.

What would she get, she pondered while walking briskly toward Espérance Plaza. A cake was too big, and anyway she hadn't warned Mrs. Leroux in time for her prepare anything special. But a muffin...yes, that would do nicely. Not the chocolate ones little Emma had brought her a few days ago. Those were good, but too sweet for her taste. No, she would get a blueberry muffin, piping hot with the blueberries almost melting in the warm batter.

The minute brass bell tinkled as she pushed the door of Rose Rock Bakery. The shop was pastel-colored and brightly lit, with glass showcases displaying a vivid array of goods. On the right and back, they revealed colorfully ornate cakes, cupcakes, pies, custards and chocolates, while the left wall, covered with wooden shelves, showed off various loaves of bread, whole wheat and multigrain, round and long, braided and straight. A few blackboards on the side listed weekly specials and quiches of the day.

Scents of sugar, butter and leaven started a saraband around Anika's nostrils as Benoit, the assistant baker, waved at her from behind the checkout counter. Delighted that he remembered her from last week, she waved back and headed for the display that offered croissants, chocolate and almond croissants, raisin rolls, and most importantly, muffins.

The blueberry muffins. *Her* blueberry muffins. When the young woman – what was her name? – asked what she would like, she pointed at them, and beamed as the girl pulled out one of the famous pink boxes, nestled the single muffin inside, and tied it off with a white ribbon.

At home, Anika placed the pink pastry box on the kitchen table, checked the voicemails (nothing), and took her time putting her coat and shoes away. She would not eat this muffin too early, only once they called. To pass the time, she cleaned the kitchen, washing the counters, polishing the wooden cabinet, dusting off Rick's spice rack, and scrubbing the grimy floor. She could not help but glance once in a while at the phone, and at the pastry box next to it.

After cleaning all there was to clean, Anika couldn't resist any longer. She lifted the lid of the pastry box and peeked at the golden muffin top splattered with blue. The scent rising from it was tantalizing. Closing the box regretfully, she pushed it away from herself.

They might not call. After all, they hadn't called last year. Or the year before. But maybe *she* could call them instead.

She froze mid-step. It was a good idea. Scary, terrifying, but good. She must have at least one of their numbers. Rushing to her old address book, she combed through the pages. There was Rick's number. Next to it, penciled in, was Kendra's new phone. At least she thought it was her new number. She couldn't find Thomas', but he lived in Boston, and she remembered the name of the firm where he worked. Yellow Pages would be able to find him. Or the Internet.

But calling...the thought made her anxious. It was one thing to wait for their call. It was easy, and safe, and if they did call they would want to talk. But calling them...who knew how they might react? Twisting her hands, she shifted from foot to foot. She would have one last glass, she decided. Sitting down, she resumed staring at the phone.

Anika drank the last drop of her glass and frowned at it. There went the last of the bottle. It was late enough in the afternoon that Kendra would be at home. Thomas had a child now, if she had understood correctly, so maybe he was out for the afternoon taking him – or her, she didn't know – on a walk, or to the park, or whatever else children did these days. She would try him last. Rick...Rick she was unsure of. After all, if he was at sea, there was no telling when he would have access to a phone. Maybe she should check the cabinet to make sure she had enough to sustain herself first.

Anika stood, and the world spun around her. Grasping the back of the chair, she made her way to the sink and washed her face. She then rummaged around the oak cabinet, but there wasn't much left. Just that last stash of rum she had promised the doctor she would throw out. But what if she really needed it? Besides, this was expensive stuff. He couldn't expect her to throw out perfectly good alcohol.

But she shouldn't touch it. In a valiant effort of self-preservation, she tried to lock the door. Once, twice...the key didn't fit. Oh! This was her house key. Where was the cabinet key? Patting her pockets, she only found a pack of tissues, and discarded it. There, next to the compass. Curse that compass.

She heard a sudden tinkle and turned around, wildly hoping for the phone, but it was the house key that had fallen out of her hand. What time was it anyway? Anika stared at the clock. After a few minutes of deciphering the complicated hands, she determined that it was after six. She had waited too late to call. Shipwreck the doctor's orders.

She pulled open the cabinet. Or tried to, because she had finally succeeded in locking the door. With a scream of frustration, she rammed the key in and turned it, yanking the delicate woodwork open. Grabbing the first bottle her hand found, she fought with the top until it opened, then had a mouthful.

She might as well call them now, while she was warmed up from the rum. She hit her knee on the table in her run for the phone, but felt almost no pain, and lifted the receiver. Rick...the phone rang as she clung anxiously to it.

"The number you have dialed is currently unavailable," notified the clipped female voice on the other end. "Please try again later."

Of course, Rick didn't have service right now. He was probably basking in the heat somewhere, without her. Resentful, she hung up and tried Kendra next. It took her time to punch in the numbers, but when she managed it, the phone beeped and beeped, until the operator informed her the number was disconnected. Cursing she slammed the phone down again. She must have her old number. When had Kendra changed?

Too bad, she thought, she would have to try Thomas now. Fumbling with her computer, she typed in her son's name, and Boston. What was that firm again? Her hazy mind took a while to spell it out. There. Search.

Her son's face, hovering over a black suit and tie, grinned from a professional-looking website. Thomas. Her stomach contracted. The man in the picture looked nothing like the little boy with curly hair – so like hers – who had run around the beach with his red kite and sent the seagulls flying. He didn't look like he ate cake at the kitchen table and collected the crumbs to feed the fish. The man here looked like a stranger.

Get back to it. It didn't matter what he looked like. This was Thomas. Where was the contact information? Contact, contact...there! 617...that was the Boston area code. Squinting at the glowing screen, she punched in the numbers and lifted the phone to her ear once more.

“Hello?”

The voice was young and elegant, set on a background of other mingled voices. A woman. Probably his wife, Anika realized. She also realized she was holding the phone upside down.

“Um...hi, um I...wan'd talk t' Thomas.”

Why was it so hard to move her lips? Maybe she should have waited a little before calling.

“I'm sorry, who is this?”

The voice was suspicious, frostily polite and ready to hang up. Who did that girl think she was, thought Anika in a surge of fury. She was acting as though Anika didn't deserve to speak with her own son! She suddenly found herself able to articulate.

“Listen girl, I want t’ talk to Thomas, I’m ‘is mo-mother!”

In the background, she heard one of the voices, one she recognized, call out:

“Who is it, love?”

“Thomas!” she roared into the receiver. “Thomas, I’m ‘ere! She not letting me talk t’ you, Thomas!”

“It sounds like a prank call,” replied the young woman on the other side of the line. Her voice was warped with disgust. “Some drunk lady is shouting she’s your mother. But you told me...”

“Give me that, Emily,” Thomas’ deep voice was deceptively calm. “I’ll handle it.”

Anika heard the receiver change hands. Finally!

“What do you want?”

“Thomas?” she stammered, “it’s me, I was wondering...your girl, wife, she was...how is your daughter?”

“It’s a son,” Thomas spoke softly, and with calm anger, “and neither he nor Emily know about you, so please let me do the calling from now on.”

“But...”

“I told you Kendra and I want to live our lives, Anika,” he continued, speaking even lower.

“But Thomas, it’s my bir’day.” Her voice sounded whiny in her ears. “Why don’ you call? You never call me anymore! You don’ c-care about me, you leave me to die ‘ere alone, n’one to ‘elp me!”

“I *would* have helped you, Anika,” How he managed to convey that much fury with a whisper, she had no idea, “we *all* tried to help for years, but you didn’t want help. You didn’t help yourself, and you sure never bothered to help us. Dad had to do everything.”

She grew angry. The ungrateful brat! He didn’t realize she’d had to give up on her dreams of a university professorship for them, lowering herself to teaching teenagers with no respect for history. She didn’t even travel like Rick did, just to take care of them. So what if she’d spent vacation or college money on drinks? So what if she’d broken a few things around the house? She worked so hard, dealing with children just like him all the time, and she needed something to look forward to at the end of the day!

She didn’t realize she had been ranting out loud until her son’s voice, clipped and cold, responded: “You haven’t changed a bit. You’re still refusing responsibility.”

The phone beeped. He had hung up.

Anika Leberre woke up with a crick in her neck, dizzy and raw-throated. She must have fallen onto the living room couch at some point. The phone had broken after she had thrown it at the wall. She had screamed herself hoarse and indulged in the rest of the rum after stepping on the pastry box and squishing her blueberry muffin. She had to get ready for school. She considered skipping, but decided against it. She had a reputation to uphold.

At school, she barely noticed that colleagues who usually said hi to her avoided her gaze, while the students melted away when they saw her. By the time she had made it

to class, she was late. Slamming the door behind her, she headed for her desk, scowling at her students, who had fallen silent at her entrance.

Why was it that they got to look smug? All these children were the same, with no feelings for anyone but themselves. No respect for her and history. What was the point of helping them, when she already knew they were worthless? She hadn't finished correcting their essays, but she didn't even want to, and she planned on telling them so.

But a single student was refusing to cower like the rest of her class. Emma, that annoyingly cheerful child, had the gall to ask her how her weekend had been, and with a smile too!

Anika's vision turned red. That child was just like Kendra, like Thomas. She would pretend to care and then run away to college and never come back. But enough was enough. Anika saw right through her little game.

"Since you feel so chatty, my darling," she croaked at the student, "why don't you summarize the chapter for us?"

The girl stopped smiling, and flushed red. Anika felt a savage stab of pleasure. That was for goading her.

"The chapter was about the Vittles Operation..." Emma's voice shook.

"What year?" barked Anika, glowering.

Did that stupid girl really think she could get away with skipping details? Emma was just like the others, useless, lazy, and Anika told her so. The girl turned a brighter shade of red.

"Who were the main participants?"

"Well, um, there was the U.S., and um..."

“Um, um, um,” mimicked Anika, “Be sure of your facts! Did you read the chapter or not? Unless you can’t even formulate a sentence properly.”

“The U.S, France, Germany...”

“You’re slouching, girl! Has no one informed you of how hunched you are? It makes you look like a camel.”

On and on it went until the bell rang and the Emma girl left, eyes shimmering with tears. The rest of the class followed, anxious to leave. Anika felt vindicated. Those insolent brats would regret making fun of her.

She hurriedly pulled a bottle of rum out of her bag, and sneaked a swig. As she wiped her mouth, her gaze happened across her desk to the door of the classroom. At the window, two students were staring at her. Shipwreck.

Emma paced home, one heavy foot at a time, barely registering Jackie’s comforting arm around her shoulders. Her cheeks were flushed, she knew, and for some reason she couldn’t stop crying. Her mind was still trapped in the classroom, in the full glare of Leberre’s fire.

Why, she wondered, as Jackie mentioned telling her mom, why had the dragon breathed fire on the hand that fed it?

“...fired,” Jackie said.

“Sorry, what?”

“I said, she’s definitely getting fired,” repeated Jackie with satisfaction. “There’s no way she’ll get away with today, not after Benjamin and Jean saw her drinking. A

bottle! She was carrying a bottle in her purse, Em! She tried to deny it but Benjamin told me she smelled like alcohol and everything. I guess there's some justice, right?"

Drinking? "Right, yeah."

Mrs. Leberre had been drinking. Even with all she had found out, Emma would have never seen that coming. That would make quite the story. As they passed Mrs. Marlot's house, she told Jackie with forced lightness about the first-page title:

FIRING A DRAGON

Mrs. Anika Leberre, known as the dragon of Rose Rock High, was fired last Wednesday in a dramatic scandal. Although the administration refused to comment on her dismissal, witnesses among the students and staff agree that Mrs. Leberre proceeded to violently rant at eleventh-grade Emma Laurier. The victim, who had been bravely attempting to appease the dragon, fell to fire and had to leave. She will be remembered as a hero in the legend of Rose Rock High. At the end of the period, when two students approached her, the teacher was found drinking alcohol. In a twist of events, Mrs. Leberre had to be forcibly removed from the classroom.

"I guess there's some justice," states Jackie Leroux, sixteen. "She burned Emma, who was trying to be kind to her."

Mrs. Leberre will be facing charges on her teaching and drinking habits. For now, the dragon remains under den arrest.

"Brilliant, Em!" Jackie laughed, "you should add that she was probably using flammable substances to improve her fiery breath the whole time!"

Emma forced herself to chuckle along with her. But as their steps led further away from the school, she felt her heart throb. Where had their long conversations, their confidences and jokes gone? For all their time spent together, it seemed she hadn't really known Mrs. Leberre at all. She had been wrong to try to tame the dragon.