

kids like



HILARY REYL

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*This book is for my sister, Eleanor O'Neill,
from her biggest fan*

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Tuesday, May 17

4:35 p.m.

Yesterday, you, Mom, and Elisabeth landed in Paris, France. You have never been here before.

Today, you are speeding through the French countryside. You are a sixteen-year-old boy named Martin on a one-hour-and-two-minute train ride from the Gare Montparnasse in Paris to a town in the Loire Valley, where there are many famous castles. Here is a list of the major castles: Amboise, Blois, Chambord, Chenonceau, Chinon, Langeais, and Villandry.

The town where you are headed is called Saint-Pierre-des-Corps. In Saint-Pierre-des-Corps, you will board a

slower train that makes three stops before it takes you to your final destination of the town of Chenonceaux, where you will find the most beautiful castle of all. The name of the town is spelled with an *x* at the end, and the name of the castle has no *x*. This shows that they are not the same thing.

This second train ride, between Saint-Pierre-des-Corps and Chenonceaux, will last twenty-one minutes.

You, Mom, and Elisabeth are in seats forty-seven, forty-eight, and forty-nine. Seats forty-seven and forty-eight are on one side of a table and seats forty-nine and fifty are on the opposite side. There is no one in seat fifty. You are in seat forty-nine, facing Elisabeth and Mom. You are next to no one.

You have never seen so many sunflowers through a window. They are all turned the same way, to face the light.

You are nervous and excited. This summer in France is a chance for you to become someone else. Someone you were meant to be. Even though you have always spoken French with your father, you have only visited this country in your head. Maybe the actual place will unlock you.

You aren't supposed to dream about being someone else. That is a form of betrayal. You're supposed to be

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proud of who you are, Martin. So you try to stop dreaming, but you can't.

Elisabeth is staring out at the sunflowers. Mom is typing on her laptop. They are not talking. You notice them glancing at you as you read, then looking quickly back into the fields and the screen. Because you know them so well, you recognize their hope for you in their eyes.

Thursday, May 19

6:00 p.m.

This morning, Elisabeth drove me to the *lycée* in the sky-blue Smart car. Mom said her production company had to buy it because Elisabeth is eighteen, and that's too young to drive a rental car in France. Elisabeth parked the Smart car on the street, then walked me down the sidewalk full of cigarette smoke outside the school, through the gate and the yard, to the office of the *directeur*, who said he was expecting me.

The outside of the *lycée* is concrete. The inside is white linoleum. There are bright-orange doors and orange metal staircases. I looked at my shoes all the way through

the cracked yard and down the linoleum hallway. I kept looking at my shoes once we reached the office. They are black Converse slip-ons. They are decorated with silver moths, drawn in glitter pen by Layla.

Denim strings from my jeans were mixed up with Layla's moths.

The cuffs of my jeans are frayed. I'm very attached to these jeans. Elisabeth has patched the knees with soft gray corduroy. I was rubbing my soft knees while I stared at the Layla moths on my Converse.

"*Bienvenue, Martin,*" the *directeur* said. He reached to shake my hand without forcing eye contact, which I appreciated. I lifted my right hand from my knee patch long enough to take his hand. Then I put it back. He said "Welcome" in English, with a thick French accent. His accent is much stronger than Papa's but not totally different. The *directeur* has a voice that I could get to know.

Elisabeth repeated what she'd already told me four times on the way down the hill to town. She said that whenever I felt done with my day I could text her to come get me. "You don't have to stay any longer than you want." She used her patient voice.

"Martin will be fine here," said the *directeur*. It was strange to hear another man besides Papa speak in

French. I was surprised I had no trouble understanding such a different voice.

The *directeur* was being optimistic. Mom says new people can be optimistic when they first see my chiseled features, my controlled manners, and my nice smile. Even if the nice smile is facing the floor. *Can it be that bad?* they wonder. Even though I am now six feet tall with a broken voice, Mom says my “elfin good looks” still make people want to help me. She tells me this is lucky.

The *directeur* led me down the hallway to a classroom and introduced me. The room was a soup of eyes and noses and teeth. It gagged me. My gaze skidded around for a place to land, a poster or a window blind or a scratch on a desktop. I needed something to hold on to so I wouldn't get swallowed up. Only I couldn't find it.

Standing in front of the class, I froze. What I saw grabbed my whole body and held it still. She was in the second-to-last row, but her image was right up in front of my face. I wondered if anyone else could see her.

She is what Marcel, who is the main character in *Search*, calls a *fillette*. She is a girl with strawberry-blond hair and freckles.

In class, she was holding a pen high up in the air, like she was making a point. I fell in love with her blue eyes, even though, from my reading of *Search*, I know they

aren't in fact blue. I wanted to touch her all over, but I couldn't move. I was like a statue having a dream.

She was looking at me, holding back a smile. Unlike the other kids, she knew exactly who I was. She wanted to tease me, not because I'm different but because she was already familiar enough to tease. I sensed recognition but also tension. I wanted to impress her somehow, but all I could do was stare with stone eyes.

Her name is Gilberte. I know her from the book I call *Search*, although it has another title in the outside world. *Search* is a French novel from a hundred years ago, and it is also the story of my life right now. Seeing Gilberte come to life today was proof of everything I believe. Even though she was wearing modern clothes like me, we recognized each other from another time and place. Even if she didn't return my stare, she signaled me with her pen and her eyes. She signaled that I meant something to her.

"Have a seat," said the teacher. Here was another unfamiliar voice making sense in French. It was female and cracked. It went in the direction of a wooden chair with a desk table attached. The chair was in the front row. It was by a large window that looked out onto a basketball court.

Somehow, I unfroze and obeyed. I hated turning

away. Why hadn't I spoken up? Gilberte was so beautiful that I wanted to turn back and yell, "You're ugly!"

I wanted to grab her and pull her to me. Instead, I sat with my back to her and tried to focus on red, blue, and green words scrolling across a whiteboard at the front of the room. My heart was pounding. I started to rock back and forth to the pounding like I haven't rocked since they taught me to stop. The legs of my chair were hitting the floor in thuds.

"Perhaps you are not interested in the use of the subjunctive tense in Racine?" The teacher's shoes stopped hard in front of my seat. They were black pumps with ground-down heels. Her skirt hung to the middle of her calves. It was gray. She smelled like tobacco.

"I don't know," I answered, loudly and clearly, in the direction of my own feet. The French came flowing out. I didn't have to think about it. "I don't know about that because I have never read Racine. I do know that my favorite tense is the conditional."

"I'm afraid we are not here to learn what the American thinks."

There was laughter.

I rocked so hard I hit the desk behind me with the back of my head. Then I stopped. I was sure I recognized

Gilberte's voice in the laughter. It was higher than the other voices. It was stormy. It had more spirit.

I stayed very still and listened. Even though this classroom was torture, I was grateful to be here. Because otherwise I might have missed her. It's a good thing I made it to school today.

I was supposed to come to the *lycée* yesterday, but I didn't. I told Mom that a school full of strangers would make me vomit. Instead, I wanted to go into town, stand outside the bakery window, and look at the madeleines. Mom said it was okay if I didn't go to school yet, but that I should give it a try soon because it wasn't appropriate for me to spend six weeks by myself wandering around a small French town.

Yesterday, I said, "I can't go. It will make me throw up."

"Okay," Mom said, looking up at the ceiling. The ceiling of our cottage is very low, with exposed beams and white plaster. Mom started breathing deeply, which is one of the ways she tricks herself into not being frustrated anymore. Finally she said, "Let's put it another way. Do you want to go to school today, or do you want to go tomorrow?"

There was only one possible answer. "Tomorrow. You want to go tomorrow. I mean, *I* want to go tomorrow."

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“So you’ll go tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow. Not today. Today, I am going to the bakery.”

“Okay,” she said.

So I walked into town to stand outside the *boulangerie* and look at the madeleines through the window. The bakery is on a small green square with two plane trees and a wrought-iron bench.

A madeleine is a mini cake that has been molded in a scallop shell. It has ridges. It is yellow and buttery and spongy. When I finally do buy a madeleine, I’ll take it back to the cottage. I’ll dip it in my tea and eat it. I know exactly what will happen next. The taste will become the “immense edifice of memory” from the book I call *Search*. My life with Papa will come straight back to me.

When Marcel, who is the narrator of *Search*, tastes a madeleine dipped in tea, he remembers the taste from when he was a little boy spending the summer in the country. His country house was in a village called Combray. On his way to Sunday mass in Combray, he used to visit his sick old aunt Léonie. And she used to give him herbal tea with madeleines.

Years later, on a cold day, his mother tries to warm him up with the exact same snack. He almost doesn’t take it because he’s grumpy, but something makes him

change his mind. When he swallows the madeleine, he's brought back to this moment with his aunt, and his whole past and everything he cares about comes back. When the tea mixed with the cake crumbs goes down his throat, all of Combray, from the flowers in his garden to the people of the village, rises up.

I started circling the bench facing the jingling bakery door. I circled it eleven times. I had this vision that I could breeze in and out of the shop, like any other customer. No need to look at the woman in pink behind the counter. Here in France, they don't know that there's anything weird about me. *Une madeleine, s'il vous plaît*. I wouldn't have to worry about my pronouns because there are none. It would all be cool.

But I couldn't go in. I wasn't ready to buy a madeleine yet. Because it wasn't a good idea to open that door alone. There was clearly someone I should wait for.

A dribbling basketball outside the open classroom window made a good thumping sound. The sound evened me out.

Thinking about how lucky I was to have found Gilberte in this class about Racine, I was able to stop rocking and sit quietly. I felt her eyes on my back.

The teacher didn't come close to me again. There was more writing on the whiteboard.

The bell rang. I jumped up, and my chair fell over sideways and clattered. The sea of students rose. Five smiles floated in my direction. It is impossible to return five smiles at once, so I did not try. I looked for Gilberte among the smiles, but she wasn't there.

She appears and then she vanishes. I have no proof that she isn't a ghost.

Suddenly, I felt exhausted. I needed to escape from this building full of strange kids. Out in the hallway, they seemed like ants rushing all over me. I had to get to a safe place where I could think about Gilberte. I buried my face in my phone and texted Elisabeth.

Friday, May 20

5:15 p.m.

Since I only lasted an hour at school yesterday, they gave me a guide to help me through the day today. His name is Simon.

“Ça va?” Simon asked when the *directeur* introduced us in the yard. That means “How are you?” when you make it a question by raising your voice at the end. When you make it a statement, and not a question, it means “I’m fine.” So when Simon asked “Ça va?” I could answer “Ça va,” then I could ask “Ça va?” back, and he could reply “Oui, ça va.” Then we could do the whole routine all over again. That’s one of the good things about speaking French. You can keep batting “Ça va”

back and forth with your partner while you let things settle.

Papa, who taught me French, used to play a game with me when I was little. The therapists at The Center gave him the idea, and he ran with it. We would ask “*Ça va?*” and answer “*Ça va,*” over and over to each other, but we would have to change how we said it each time to give it a different meaning. The questions could be “Are you okay?” or “Are you even still alive?” or “Are you having fun?” And the answers could be “I’m bored,” or “I’m fantastic,” or “I’m going to puke”—but all with the same words: *Ça va*. You had to give them different meanings with your voice and your face. And you had to look the other person right in the eye while you were doing it. We got good at it. I even laughed. He did too. I don’t know how much help the game has been to me, because there is no one besides Papa I could ever be so silly with. Not that Mom and Elisabeth aren’t wonderful, but they aren’t Papa. Mom and Elisabeth are everything to me now, but they are separate. They are not of my world.

Once Simon and I had done our *Ça vas*, he said we were going to math class and I said, “Math class. Thank you.”

It was geometry, which I like.

When we came into the classroom, I scanned for

Gilberte. I could instantly see that she wasn't there. It was disappointing, but it also allowed me to relax a little.

Doing math in French instead of English isn't strange. The geometry proofs are the same. *Search* says that habit takes you in its arms.

In the hallway, walking from math class to history class, Simon asked when Baxter Wolff and Gloria Seegar are coming to start filming with Mom. I realized people here know I'm Samantha Mitchell's son, and they have been talking about her movie.

"Next week," I answered to his black Doc Martens. Forty percent of the shoes here are Doc Martens and twenty-five percent are Converse.

"Cool. Will you get to meet them?"

"As much as I meet anyone." This is a joke Papa taught me to make about myself. He said it would put people at ease.

Simon didn't get the joke. "What's the movie about?" he asked.

I repeated Mom's line: "It's a Renaissance costume drama. It's about the rivalry between two powerful women over the castle of Chenonceau during the reign of Henri II. One was the queen, Catherine de Médicis, and one was the king's mistress, Diane de Poitiers."

Simon took a few seconds to respond. I had given him

a lot of information. It may have sounded like I knew what I was talking about. But I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm an excellent parrot.

Elisabeth is the one who understands Mom's movies. I don't like them until I've seen them at least ten times with Layla on the couch in her basement. And I certainly never understand them before they exist.

When Simon finally reacted, he said, "*Sympa*," which is short for *sympathique*. It means a combination of "nice" and "cool."

Then he said, "Maybe you will tell us where the actors are staying and if there is any love between them?" He laughed. "Maybe you will even invite us to a party where they will be?"

I took a quick glance up from his shoes toward his face. I saw pointed eyebrows, an upturned nose, and high cheekbones. He is Bloch from *Search*.

Bloch is Marcel's intellectual friend. He gives Marcel books by a writer named Bergotte. Marcel goes crazy for Bergotte's writing. One day Marcel's brilliant neighbor, Mr. Charles Swann, sees Marcel reading a Bergotte novel under a tree, and asks where he got it. Marcel answers that the book is a present from his friend Bloch. It turns out Mr. Swann is friends with Bloch too. Mr. Swann describes Bloch's pointed eyebrows, upturned nose,

and high cheekbones. He says they are exactly like a portrait of Mahomet II by Bellini. “Once he grows a goatee, he will be the same person,” says Mr. Swann.

One of the reasons I love Mr. Swann is that he recognizes people through pictures he studies and loves. Matching up people with pictures makes perfect sense to me.

Simon looks like Bloch, who looks like Mahomet II. This made me want to be his friend. But I wasn’t ready.

Walking down the hallway past all the bright-orange doors, I got anxious. I wanted to text Elisabeth to come rescue me. But I’d promised her I would do everything I could to at least make it through lunch today. So instead I texted Layla, even though it was the middle of the night back home. Mom has given me an unlimited texting plan. I am much more skilled at writing than at talking out loud.

I’m spending the morning with a moth named Simon.

Layla wrote back immediately, **Is he a colorful moth or a gray one?**

Maybe colorful. He is exactly like Bloch, from *Search*. What are you doing up so late?

I’m watching Matthew’s accident.

Matthew was a character in *Downton Abbey* until he

was killed off the show in a car accident. He was married to Lady Mary. She is the oldest, the most glamorous, of the three *Downton* sisters. Matthew had a World War I wound that seemed like it would leave him paralyzed. Only it didn't. He recovered, got married, had a baby, and then he died in a stupid car accident. The final shot of the last episode of Season Three shows Matthew's lifeless, bleeding face on the side of the road. This is one of the episodes Layla has gotten me to watch a few times. Layla has watched it over one hundred times. She says that in every repetition she sees something new in Matthew's dead eyes.

I didn't answer Layla right away because Simon was asking me if I had met Peter Bird when he starred in Mom's Sherlock Holmes movie. It took all my politeness to say, "Yes, but I'm not sure what he's like."

"How come you speak French so well?" asked another boy walking next to Simon.

I'm used to being taken for a freaky genius with mental superpowers, like the ability to learn whole languages in a few days. For all these kids know, I might have mastered French last week. But I don't have what they call "savant syndrome." The only thing unique about me is my own bubble that I mostly live in. I'm good

at math and I have a good memory for certain details, but nothing special. I can't surprise people, seconds after they tell me their birth date, with the fact that they were born on a rainy Tuesday or a sunny Sunday. I'm not cool that way. That's not me.

When I didn't answer him, the boy in the hallway, blue Converse high-tops, tried again. "It's crazy for an American to speak French like this, no?"

"My dad is French," I blurted.

"*Sympa*," said Simon. "Is your dad here too?"

"No, he's back in the States." This is true.

"He has to work in America?" Simon asked.

"Sort of," I said. I didn't feel like explaining to Simon about Papa.

Now I really wanted to text Elisabeth to get me out of here, because things were starting to move too fast. "Come on. Just make it through lunch," I said to myself, out loud, in English. The scuffed white of the hallway floor filled my eyes.

"What's on your shoes?" blue-Converse boy asked me.

"Oh, those are moths that a friend of mine drew."

There was a silence, and then Simon said, "*Sympa*."

I was grateful.

We arrived at history class.

Gotta go, I texted Layla, with a tearful emoji to show that I wasn't ignoring the sadness of her dead-Matthew episode.

After history, I tried lunch. The cafeteria was hard. Gilberte wasn't there. In the food line, I recognized a slice of familiar cake called a "quatre-quarts," which means "four quarters" because it has four ingredients: butter, flour, sugar, and eggs. It's almost the same as pound cake. It was the only thing I felt like eating. I took a slice and went to sit down at a table with Simon.

"Is that all you're having?" asked Simon.

"I like quatre-quarts," I said. I forced myself to look at his plate of hot food and then up at his face. It was definitely the portrait of Mahomet II by Bellini. I have a postcard of it in my collection.

"I like quatre-quarts too," said Simon. I recognized his words as an example of friendliness, a way to find common ground. "They remind me of when I was a kid and life was easy." Then he changed the subject to Gloria Seegar. He asked if I knew what she likes to eat.

"She likes sashimi and avocados with lime juice," I said.

I was burning to ask Simon if he happened to be friends with a beautiful strawberry-blond girl named Gilberte. Then a wave of people crashed all around us

with trays and teenage slang that I mostly didn't get since I learned my French first as a young kid and then from an old novel. All I had to hold on to was my cake. I took tiny bites because I had to make it last through the lunch period or I might go under.

"Ça va?" Simon asked.

"Ça va." I made a lame smile into space and kept up my super-slow chewing.

The cake reminded me of being a kid too. Papa and I used to bake quatre-quarts together all the time. We were supposed to branch out and bake many different kinds of cakes. But after a few disasters trying to vary our routine, we stopped pretending.

When I was six, a speech therapist told Papa that my thoughts were like the ingredients of a cake. I could line them up beautifully, one next to the other on the kitchen counter, measured, counted, and repeated, but I couldn't mix them together to create something new.

Papa refused to believe I would never be more than a list of ingredients. And so we started baking cakes together. They were delicious, golden, and buttery. The whole family loved them at first, and Papa and I loved them unconditionally. We baked almost every day.

Mom started to get annoyed that the kitchen was always dusted in flour and the mixing bowls were sticky.

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Once she yelled at Papa, “Is this really what you quit your job to do?!” And he yelled back, “This *is* my goddamn job!” Then he smashed an egg on the floor, which Mom said was a pathetic gesture. She said the cake baking was a kind of voodoo superstition, but then she took me aside and said she didn’t mean it.

I wiped up the egg with a dishrag. I enjoy the circular movement of a rag.

I miss Papa’s and my quatre-quarts. I miss the measuring, the pouring, and the stirring, but mostly the way they tasted. So much better than this cafeteria version.

The other kids in the cafeteria were glancing at my tiny bites, but I didn’t make them any bigger. I made the cake last all the way through lunch.

Saturday, May 21

11:30 a.m.

Mom was excited about the croissants she bought at the *boulangerie* this morning. She said they were “flaky and fresh,” that they “managed to make butter seem airy.” She squinted while she ate hers. The sun shone on her hair, which is long, thick, and wavy, light brown with a few gray streaks. The sun made the gray streaks silver.

We ate the croissants on our stone terrace in the sunshine. Mom was smiling, but not her tight smile that makes her cheekbones pop out, not her smile for when she is working hard to get people to do what they need to do. This was her other smile, where her teeth show

and the skin wrinkles around her eyes. This is the smile that relaxes me. I tried to smile back at her with the same soft lips and crinkly eyes. I like it when we are similar.

The cottage we've rented is on a hill. It is made of uneven, sand-colored stones. It has two chimneys. It has four windows in front, four in back, and two on each side. The shutters are painted red. There is ivy growing halfway up the façade. There is a big lilac bush with white flowers by the door, which is red like the shutters. At the front of the cottage is a terrace with a green downward-sloping view to a river. I call the river the Vivonne because that's the name of the river that Marcel follows on his afternoon walks.

Today at breakfast, an actress named Fuchsia came over. Fuchsia has large, distracting breasts. She said she didn't eat flour or butter but she would eat our croissants because they looked "special." This made no sense to me, but I have learned that most of the people Mom works with are inconsistent. They are different things to different people at different times, like many of the characters in *Search*. And this is how I'm able to understand them, by knowing I can't.

Mom also brought some local jams: rhubarb, apricot, and green plum.

"Rhubarb is my favorite!" I said.

“Martin,” said Mom, “rhubarb is *my* favorite. Now, can you tell me what *your* favorite is?” Her smile went away and her forehead furrowed into lines. Mom worries a lot about my pronouns.

Until I was eight years old, I called myself “you” because that’s what everyone else called me, and I called other people “I” because that’s what they called themselves. Once I finally learned to read, I was mostly able to get it straight. But still, I can’t say pronouns right when I’m nervous, and Fuchsia was making me nervous.

“I don’t know,” I said. And then it came out again, in a perfect echo: “Rhubarb is *my* favorite. Now, Martin, can you tell me what *your* favorite is?”

Mom looked away.

“I sense a teaching moment, Martin,” Elisabeth said. I didn’t understand why the teaching-moment thing was funny in this situation, but I could tell it was supposed to be funny from her joking tone, and so I laughed.

“Let’s do a blind taste test,” she said. “Close your eyes.”

I closed my eyes. I was happy to be getting her attention. Even when I can’t see Elisabeth in real life, I can see her perfectly in my head. She has gray eyes, like Papa’s and mine, and pale skin but almost no freckles, and a very high forehead with a widow’s peak. She has a thin, pointy face. Her hair is redder than Mom’s. It would fall

down past her shoulders if she didn't pull it back into a ponytail.

Because her hair was up, I could see her ears. They were golden at the edges where the sun touched them. She was wearing a royal-blue bathrobe. She looked like a holy figure from one of the medieval paintings in my collection. Mr. Swann loved medieval paintings.

With my eyes still closed, I heard Fuchsia talking. "The geraniums in these pots are such a marvelous color. What gorgeous stone pots," she said. "Did all these Provençal dishes come with the rental? These bowls with the ear-shaped handles on either side are fantastic. They call them elephant ears." She tried to pronounce "elephant ears" in French—"oreilles d'éléphant"—but it sounded so out of tune that I winced.

Three spoonfuls of jam came into my mouth, one after the other.

"Keep your eyes closed," said Elisabeth. "Don't cheat. Concentrate on the flavor. Is it sweet? A bit sour maybe? And the texture. Are there strings, berries, flecks of fruit? Which one do *you* prefer?"

The first two were very sweet and unfamiliar. I didn't like them. The last spoonful I recognized. It expanded inside me into a giant memory of Papa. He loved this taste too. Our old kitchen sprung up behind my closed

eyes. We were sitting there at the breakfast table, with crumbs and jam smears on our plates. We were back together having toast with butter and jam. He was touching a light-yellow napkin to his chin, which was dark from stubble because he was working from home. I was thirteen. He was handing me the first volume of *Search, Swann's Way*. It was a Folio Classique paperback with a picture of a little boy in a blue-and-white-striped shirt and navy sailor jacket. In French, the title is *Du côté de chez Swann*. The boy on the book has dark hair and gray eyes, like Papa and me.

Papa said, "This is the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust." His voice was deep and a little shaky, like a lake in a breeze. He was speaking softly, even though there was no one in the house to be quiet for since there were only the two of us. "Between us, let's call it *Search*. In my opinion, it's the greatest book ever written. It says the most about life, the most about pain, and the most about the way our minds can make us happy."

Two years later he was gone. I miss him more than anything.

I opened my eyes and made the effort to say, "Elisabeth, I prefer the third jam."

"You see, Mom." Elisabeth laughed. "He *does* prefer

the rhubarb after all. You don't have a monopoly on it. Martin has his own mind. Give him some credit!"

"Yay, Martin!" Fuchsia chimed in.

Fuchsia is not a total stranger because I have watched her seven times in Mom's movie about Henry VIII. She hovers on the skin of my bubble. I can see her, but not for very long.

I remembered from the movie that she was pretty with sparkly blue eyes and those big breasts. I knew I should look at her, since she had congratulated me. I tried for her face, but ended up staring at her chest instead. The breasts were confusing now in a white T-shirt instead of squished forward and laced up in period costume, but they were recognizable.

Fuchsia does not drink coffee, so she was having a verveine infusion with breakfast. I wished I could smile up at her blue eyes, but it wasn't happening. Instead, I forced myself to shift focus from her breasts to her herbal tea. At first, this wasn't easy. Then I got interested in watching the dead leaves. They were expanding in the boiling water as though they were coming back to life. "Those leaves of yours are embalmed spring evenings," I said. I was quoting Marcel.

"Wow," she said to Mom, "you did tell me he was special. He sure is!"

Saturday, May 21

Special is one of the words I have no picture for. It doesn't attach to anything in my mind. People call me "special" a lot, and I can't understand it. When I hear "special," I see blobs.

I stopped worrying about Fuchsia. I put rhubarb jam on my croissant and winked across time at Papa.

10:15 p.m.

This afternoon, I felt Gilberte's eyes on my back, and I whipped around to look for her.

I was wandering through the hawthorn bushes down the road from our cottage, listening to Vinteuil's sonata, when her gaze landed. I turned, but there were only the white flowers with white spray in their centers. Thousands of white flowers and no girl.

When I couldn't see her, I even took my headphones off in the middle of the second movement so that I could hear her if she crunched the ground running away. I hate interrupting my music. It hurts. So there was something very important going on to make me do it.

I took off my headphones and let my brain rip as the music pulled away from it. I had to suffer to give myself the chance to hear her footsteps or to catch sight of her face. In her own strange way, she was saying hello, and

I had to show her that I was paying attention. I started pushing branches aside, like I could somehow rustle her up if I made enough commotion. I had to meet her.

Only I didn't meet her.

I met Elisabeth, who usually makes me happy, but not this time, because she was not Gilberte. Elisabeth came walking up to me in the hawthorns, holding her giant chemistry book with the blue molecule on the cover. Her ponytail was looser and lower than usual, so that her free hair made a pretty red-gold spray around her face. I noticed that her arms, neck, and legs were less pale than usual. They are turning a dusty gold, probably because she is doing most of her work on the terrace or by the pool.

Elisabeth was wearing her red dress, which I have seen eight times and have grown to love. She sewed it herself. It has little white flowers shaped the same as the blossoms on the hawthorn bushes. She saw me looking from the blossoms on her dress to the real live ones on the bushes and back. I liked the repetition of the patterns.

"Can you tell I'm trying to blend into the landscape with my flowery dress?" She smiled. She smiles a lot, and when she does, her upper lip pulls way up to show her gums. She says she can't help it. She's a mostly happy

person even though she has a brother who is fixated on a hundred-year-old French novel and repeats a lot of what she says back to her. “You, of all people, should appreciate my effort to celebrate the flowers,” she said.

“Celebrate the flowers,” I repeated, because it sounded so nice.

Elisabeth is very smart. She’s becoming a psychiatrist, like Maeva. She finished high school a whole semester early so that she could come on location with Mom and me before she does her summer internship in a hospital and then goes to college at Stanford. After Stanford, she will go to medical school. I don’t want her to leave us, and that’s one of the reasons she has come to France: to say good-bye to me.

I did not finish my year at The Center early. I am following along with my classwork from here, emailing assignments. The Center is still my school. It’s a very small school for kids with challenges. I’ve been there since kindergarten. Mom is very involved and helps with fundraising by inviting all of her famous friends to the annual benefit. Papa used to be involved too. He used to volunteer every Tuesday and Thursday morning in the library.

The *lycée* in Chenonceaux is not my real school. It is the place I go to practice French and perhaps to make

some friends. I could never actually do the work there. I'm not general-ed enough.

In the bushes today, Elisabeth told me, "You're lucky you have your bubble because you can keep me inside, close to you all the time. I'm not going anywhere!"

She thinks she's kidding when she says that she's not leaving. What she doesn't realize is that she's not kidding. Not at all. Because I do have a super-strong bubble, and she's not going anywhere outside it, not to Stanford, not to medical school, not anywhere.

"Are you coming back to the house?" she asked. "Want to walk together?"

"Thank you, but I don't want to walk together," I said. "I need to wait a little longer."

"Wait for what?"

"Wait for what? Just wait."

"Okay." She smiled again.

I wanted my music back. I started fiddling with my headphones.

"Let me guess what you're listening to."

"Let me guess? Let you guess?" This word order always confuses me.

"I know what you're listening to, silly. I'm teasing you, but not in a mean way, okay?" She thinks it's a good idea

to tease me gently so that I will learn about humor as a way to interact. It's very kind of her. "Don't look so sad. It's a pretty sonata. It's fine."

It's a pretty violin-and-piano sonata by a composer named César Franck. In *Search*, Proust changed it into the *Sonate de Vinteuil*. I find it crazy beautiful. Only I've learned that if I don't control myself and I play it over and over, they will take my music away, because too much music keeps me outside reality. So I keep my listening under control.

My music fixation is as old as I am. Sixteen.

Before my parents put me in The Center, when I was in a regular preschool, I started to freak out about music. Whenever the teachers, or Mom or Papa, stopped playing a CD of my nursery songs before it was finished, or if they skipped a song or repeated one so that the order changed, I started to scream. Not an angry scream but a painful one. At first, they all thought I was super smart because I knew all these songs by heart, in French and in English, and because I seemed to care so much about them that it literally hurt to take them away.

Mom and Papa went from being delighted that I could sing so well to being very scared.

I remember hearing Mom through the bedroom wall

when I was five. She was crying. “He’s Rain Man,” she sobbed. “We thought he was so cute, and he’s actually Rain Man. How could we be so blind?”

“He’s still cute,” whispered Papa, who knew I was listening, because I loved to listen to their voices while I fell asleep. Their voices were the next best thing to music. “He’s still wonderful.”

“Of course he is,” Mom tried to whisper too, but she was still screeching. “But it’s not what we assumed. It’s nothing like what we assumed.”

“No, it’s not. It’s a surprise. It’s a turn ‘. . . *je tourne une rue . . . mais . . . c’est dans mon coeur.*’”

“What does that mean?” Mom doesn’t speak much French.

“It’s from Proust, about losing your way and wanting to ask directions, making a turn, realizing the turn you have made is not on the street but within your heart, and it is about to take you back to yourself.”

“Can you just speak English? This is important.”

Suddenly, I echoed loudly from my bed through the wall. “Can you just speak English? This is important.” I took a breath and kept going. “. . . *je tourne une rue . . . mais . . . c’est dans mon coeur.*’ What does that mean? What does that mean? What does that mean?” I yelled.

Mom and Papa were silent.

“He’s still cute!” I cried out. “How could we be so blind?”

When I was older, I found Papa’s sentence in *Search*. “. . . *je tourne une rue . . . mais . . . c’est dans mon coeur.*” Marcel is talking about the bell tower in Combray, which made a huge impression on him when he was a boy, and how sometimes as an adult wandering in a new city, asking directions to get where he needs to go, he’ll stumble on a bell tower, and he’ll just stare at it. He’ll forget the actual turn he was supposed to make in whatever town he’s in. That’s when he realizes the turn he’s taking is inside himself, and not on any map.

I watched Elisabeth go, and I stayed, pacing through the hawthorns, thrusting the branches aside as though I might uncover Gilberte. Even though the tug was strong, I didn’t put my headphones back on. Maeva would be proud of me for not retreating into my music.

In case she was still watching, I showed Gilberte that I don’t give up easily.

Gilberte is the proud daughter of Mr. Charles Swann. The Swanns have an estate near Marcel’s summer house in Combray.

Mr. Swann is the perfect neighbor. He charms everybody in Marcel’s family. He knows all about art and literature. He always shows up with beautiful presents. But

Marcel's family never goes to Mr. Swann's because Mrs. Swann is the "wrong kind" of woman. Her name used to be Odette de Cr cy, and she was a "high-class prostitute" before she married Mr. Swann. Marcel isn't allowed to see Odette or her daughter, Gilberte. The Swann estate is off-limits.

The idea of the forbidden Gilberte grips Marcel. Mr. Swann talks a lot about his daughter. He tells Marcel that she's friends with famous writers and painters. She seems like a myth. The first time Marcel sees her, it happens by accident during a country walk with his father and grandfather. She is going through the hawthorns holding up a gardening shovel. He stares at her, the taboo strawberry-blond girl from Mr. Swann's art world. He stares until he is yanked away by the adults. Marcel is so frustrated that he wishes he had been brave enough to yell some insult at her. He should have told her she was ugly, which is the opposite of the truth. Anything to make her notice and remember him.

I feel the same. I should have yelled something into those bushes. But I'm not very good on the spot.

Sunday, May 22

8:45 p.m.

My room is in the cottage's attic, so it has sloping walls. It's a small space, which I like because it contains me. It has light-blue wallpaper between exposed beams. The beams run up and down the walls and along the line of the ceiling where the two walls meet. The room is a tent framed by old wood.

Swinging from one of the beams above my narrow bed are two cobwebs that I have grown friendly with.

There is a window by my bed that I leave open a crack at night. I don't pull down the shades because I like the

geraniums in my window box. The crickets sing very loudly. At first, their song was a back-and-forth seesaw in my gut. I had to put my headphones on to block the crickets out. But two nights ago their music started rocking me gently instead of making me seasick.

This evening, I Skyped Maeva's Sunday-morning life-skills group with other kids from The Center. It's nine hours earlier in Los Angeles. The kids were eating pancakes. Some were eating blueberry pancakes and some chocolate-chip pancakes. Maeva was eating oatmeal and drinking coffee.

Layla was there. Her pancakes were blueberry, as always. Layla is very small for her age, which is sixteen, like mine. But on my laptop, she appeared very big. She has dark hair and green eyes with black lashes that are often clumped together in groups of two or three. She clumps them on purpose with her mascara, to be distinctive. On-screen they looked especially dark and matted, like a close-up of spider legs. And her hands around her blue mug of mint tea looked even more enormous and out of proportion to her body than they are in real life. She can stretch them to play octaves on the piano.

The group was sitting in their usual booth at the Honest Bean Cafe on Beverly Boulevard in West Hollywood.

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It's Maeva's favorite place. We've all been meeting with her at the Honest Bean since sixth grade. The booth upholstery is dark red. There is a large framed poster of an ice-cream sundae at eye level. Seeing the cherry on top of the sundae made me feel at home. Then I noticed a tiny bright patch on the cherry, a reflection of light. I had never seen this reflection before. Noticing the bright patch made me feel slightly different from the Martin who used to sit under that poster, back at home, before I came to France.

Maeva, who has blond hair and a muscular body, was wearing black like she always does. The way the layers of her clothes all flowed into one another was very familiar and comforting. But then I noticed that she had cut her hair from very long to shoulder length, and I felt different again.

"Hi, Martin." Maeva smiled at me. "How are you doing? How's France?"

I looked at Maeva, Layla, Joey, Claire, and Mitchell on-screen with their pancake plates, syrup jugs, mugs, and glasses of orange juice. I took a deep breath and said, "I feel that France is the beginning of my real life."

"That's fantastic," said Maeva. "Can you explain why?"

Before I could answer, Mitchell interrupted. "Is it because you're in a general-ed school? Layla told us

you're in a general-ed school. Is that true? Is that really the case?"

"Yes," I answered, "that is the case. But that's not why my life is starting for real. What I mean is that certain things are going to happen to me in France because I've read them in *Search*. Actually, things are already starting to happen."

Next Layla chimed in her support. "Martin, you are destined to be in France right now just like Lady Grantham was destined to move to England to save Downton Abbey with her American fortune."

"Thanks, Layla," I said.

"Can you tell us one of the things that has happened to you so far?" asked Maeva.

"Well, I've met a strawberry-blond girl with freckles named Gilberte Swann, who is my love interest."

"Where did you meet her?"

"Well, I haven't exactly met her yet, but I've seen her. That's what's supposed to happen first. I see her and think a lot about her, and then I meet her and then we eventually get close."

"Martin, is this girl really called Gilberte Swann or does she remind you strongly of the character?" Maeva asked.

This question made me uncomfortable. I stared at the

kids in the Honest Bean Cafe. They stared back. Finally, I mumbled, “She reminds me strongly.” I knew this had to be the right answer. But it was not the answer I wanted.

“I need to say something!” Layla was suddenly yelling. Her eyes got wide and jittery. They looked like pinwheels. She slammed her mug down, and her tea sprayed out onto the table. “I want you to know that your affinity is getting in the way right now.”

Layla has warned me before that, even though she supports me, it can seem pretentious for a boy my age to talk so much about a twentieth-century French novel. She points out that I don’t even know what half the words in the book mean. She also understands, because we are similar in certain ways, that I would much rather be comfortable with my book than cool without it.

So why is she giving me a hard time? She knows better. Force of habit makes me carry *Search* around, because it has filled me up like an empty glass for years. This force is so strong that it’s hard to care about anything else, like everyone thinking I’m weird. Everyone thinking I’m weird has become habit too.

Layla and I are both attached to stories. I like Proust, and she likes *Downton Abbey*. Other Center kids are way into movies. Joey first learned to talk using Disney animation.

Kids like Us

Kids like us watch our shows and imitate what we see and hear. We do this until it all starts to connect with something inside of us. Then we can start to express ourselves. First, we do it in echoes. Then we move on to what they call “variations.” It’s a kind of backward learning. It teaches us how to act. At The Center, they’ve given us a name to this backwardness. They call it “affinity.” They say “affinity therapy” can help us to break through to the outside.

With a book, there’s less to imitate than with movies or TV. There are only the words to go on, no images. So my brain has to work extra hard. I have to picture Marcel and Mr. Swann for myself. Layla’s *Downton Abbey* is full of visuals, like faces with expressions. She says I’ve made a hard choice.

She also understands that I didn’t choose *Search*. It chose me. You might say I walk around in a prison. But at least it’s a prison that moves, not some cage stuck in one spot. I’m surrounded by *Search* the way most people are surrounded by their own souls.

“Layla,” Maeva asked with a gentle voice. “When you say Martin’s affinity for his book is getting in the way, what do you mean? Getting in the way of what?”

“Just getting in the way!” Layla’s voice was too loud.

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She banged her mug again. Then she closed her eyes tightly while we all watched, and she did what Maeva calls “rechanneling.” When she opened her eyes, she changed the subject. “A lack of compassion can be as vulgar as an excess of tears.’”

“Are you quoting your show?” asked Mitchell.

“Yes. Lady Grantham said that.” Layla smiled, and I felt relieved.

“Maybe this relates to what Mitchell was saying the other day about how affinities are a portal into real life,” Maeva said. “Does anyone have any more thoughts about this or about Martin’s book now that he is actually in France?”

Instead of answering her, everyone started to talk about their shows. I said I should probably get going. So we all high-fived and fist-bumped. I noticed as I rapped on the screen that I missed the feeling of real hands. Then we said good-bye. The cherry on the sundae poster was the last thing to vanish when I switched off the group.

I’m the only kid at The Center who likes to be affectionate. Once I get to know people, that is. I enjoy the touch of familiar skin. It holds me like water. So it’s been hard for me to understand that most of my friends don’t

like to be touched or hugged. Even Layla won't get closer than a fist bump. Her fist is tight and her knuckles are very white.

Twenty minutes after I turned off my Skype, Layla texted me. **It was good to see you. The brown couch in your French house looks comfortable. How's the movie? How are the moths? Do you think our phones are instruments of communication or torture?**

When she is in a philosophical mood, Layla signs off her messages with: **Do you think our phones are instruments of communication or torture?** This is her version of a quote from Lady Grantham, played by Maggie Smith. Mom has promised to introduce Layla to Maggie Smith someday, because Mom has good access to famous people. Layla reminds Mom of this promise every time she sees her.

Layla is interested in the star-studded aspect of Mom's movies. She's attracted to the idea of glamour. This is because a television show has taught her how to be.

Downton Abbey would not interest me at all if it didn't remind me of Layla. I have only watched three episodes, including Matthew's accident, in her basement. So most of her quoting sounds original to me. She says the same about mine, because she hasn't read *Search*.

Layla makes a point of asking questions in her texts.

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The Center teaches us that questions are important. They are a good strategy for conversations. A person should show an interest in details, even if the interest is fake. If she acts curious enough, eventually the pretend interest will become real. Layla has reached this point in her questioning where she cares about the answers.

I answered her text right away. **Mom's movie is starting to shoot. Fuchsia is here. The big stars come next week. The moths aren't around yet.**

All good, she answered. When she writes very short texts, it means she is watching an episode and can't focus, but she still wants to send at least a couple of words so that she doesn't leave me hanging.

I sent her back a smiling emoji. Emojis are an autistic kid's dream.