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

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 Converses.

"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."

"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.