

Daisy

in

Exile

by

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The French got into the bad habit of speaking French a long time ago, so since this story takes place in France there's some French in it. But don't worry, I didn't speak a word of it when I got there and you can mostly puzzle it out, plus I put a little glossary in the back if you're curious.

1. A Room of My Own

My own room.

First time ever.

I'd always been thrown in with my older sister, Clymene. It's the most amazing thing having your own room, your own desk, your own desk lamp you can turn on in the middle of the night without anybody biting your head off; and nobody texting all night with their toad boyfriend, messages swooshing away at all hours; or flinging your underwear at you just cause you forgot to pick it up.

Not to say I didn't miss Clymene. That's the weird part.

Right after we got to the apartment and I'd heaved my suitcase onto the bed, Aunt Mill stuck her head in the door and said, "Do you want to call and tell them you've arrived?"

"No thanks," I said.

"Are you sure? I have unlimited international minutes on my cell phone."

"No thanks," I said again.

Aunt Mill cocked her head. "Okay, well, I'll just give a quick call so your mom won't worry."

Knock yourself out, lady, I wanted to say. And she could tell that's what I wanted to say. She seemed pretty sharp, Aunt Mill, like a lean, mean math teacher. But no way I was ever talking to any of my family, ever. They could just get whatever updates they wanted from Aunt Mill, with her unlimited international minutes. Pretty soon they'd lose interest and wouldn't even pretend to care. Years from now, I'd meet my new little

brother and they'd say, this is your sister, Daisy, and he'd go, "I have another sister? Really?"

So, okay, let me go back a little.

When we returned from Moken Island, which you can read about in my first book, I'd missed about three weeks of school and had to jump right in. You'd think maybe after you'd been shipwrecked, fought off pirates, recovered a stolen treasure and survived a typhoon or two, your classmates would give you some social cred. Not likely. Sixth grade cliques at the Fairfield School had formed faster than buboes on a plague victim.

I got tossed in with a new girl named Lucia Sarir, who was tall and thin and walked like a giraffe and never said anything to anybody. Her parents were from two different countries, like Estonia and Kazakhstan, so she wore weird clothes, purchased in Bulgrungastad or something. But once you got past her shy-wall, Lucia was clever and funny and played killer chess. Trouble was, she got picked on constantly. Especially by Martin Blindenbok.

Martin would follow behind her and mimic her walk while everybody laughed. Even I pretended to laugh too, so Martin wouldn't pick on me, which made me feel like a worm.

So no big surprise really when, one Monday, after a weekend of feeling entirely wormy for betraying Lucia, I socked Martin Blindenbok in the nose. He'd snuck up behind her and knocked the books from her arms. Martin is a whole head taller than me and weighs twice as much as me, but I didn't think about that. I just let him have it. His nose exploded blood and he fell back and hit his head on a locker and crashed down in a blob.

Next thing I knew I was in Principal Smootin's office, getting expelled.

Good move, Daisy.

Dad came over to school. Mom, who was monster preggers, had to stay home cause she had something called preeclampsia pre-term labor, which meant she couldn't get out of bed. After Dad talked to them, the school agreed to send me to some child psychologist lady.

The evening after my visit with the psychologist lady, who asked me a million dumb questions, Mom and Dad had a humongo argument. He's a professor of archeology and she works for a textbook publisher, so you'd think they could talk in a civilized way, but forget it, tons of shouting, cups breaking, the works. From upstairs, I couldn't tell what they were saying except for a few times when they got crazy loud, like when Mom yelled, "Over my dead body."

Next day, at breakfast, they said they'd made a decision. They were sending me to be home schooled by my mom's sister, Aunt Millicent. Since I suck at math, and Aunt Mill is a math teacher, Mom and Dad thought it would be a good idea. Only trouble was, Aunt Mill lived in Paris.

I argued with them for like an hour. It was so unfair.

But later that night, Clymene came over to my bed when the lights were out and whispered that she heard Mom and Dad talking. She said they felt terrible.

"Good," I said, "they should."

"No, Daisy, you don't get it. Dad was talking about how the school psychologist thought you were suffering from post-dramatic trauma disorder from the experience on the island and that you should be put on medication before returning to school."

“Gross. No way I’m doing that.”

“That’s what Mom and Dad said. Mom was so mad Dad told her to calm down, which of course had the exact opposite effect. That’s why she was screaming, “Over my dead body.”

Oh.

Phone calls were made. E-mails flew back and forth. It was settled.

What did I know about Aunt Mill? She lived in Paris. She was Mom’s older sister. She wasn’t married and didn’t have kids. She’d only visited a few times, when I was little. She always gave us weird gifts like Becassine and Bleurette dolls, which are old French dolls that nobody ever heard of, but which Mom insisted were collectors items and hid away somewhere.

So I really didn’t know anything about Aunt Mill.

Dad gave me his old laptop. Clymene lent me her digital camera. Mom gave me her original 1985 addition of *Agatha Christie’s Complete Miss Marple Mysteries* to read on the plane, which I loved. But then she ruined it by getting all teary and reaching up from the bed to hug me before I left.

Because I was twelve and traveling alone, the Air France people put a plastic pouch around my neck with my ticket and passport inside. I got to be escorted onto the plane by my own stew.

Go geek girl.

All the little French families sitting around me on the jet seemed so happy, kids talking in French to French moms, while French stews in their pale-blue uniforms, hair

perfect, scarves perfect, everything about them French and perfect, handed out French magazines and French earphones.

I tried to read *Miss Marple*, but the stories just made me worry about Lucia. Who would protect her? Plus, I was ticked with my mom for packing me off and then getting all sobby about it. Halfway through the flight I look down through the clouds and saw icebergs, little cold things bobbing in the vast blue. That's the way I felt inside.

Aunt Mill—dressed in the same kind of trim suit as the stewes, only in pine green—stood at the customs exit to greet me. She spoke to the Air France people in fluent French as they signed my paper work. She's not much older than my mom and looked a lot like her, though younger somehow, thinner, blonder hair, more—I don't know—stylish. She has an ever-so-slight limp, which you only notice really when she's going up or down stairs. She practically smothered me with her hug.

We took a taxi from the airport. As we neared the center of the city, the streets got smaller and the buildings more old and crooked until pretty soon we turned down a street that was barely wide enough for a single car. Aunt Mill told me the French name for her neighborhood but I promptly forgot it. She said it meant swamp in English and that they drained a swamp four hundred years ago to build all these big fancy palaces for all the rich fancy people who then got their heads cut off with a guillotine. That part I remembered.

The taxi stopped in front of these huge green doors that Aunt Mill called carriage doors. In the old days, people would drive in with their horses and carriages. But now, inside one of the big doors was a smaller door that we walked through.

I dragged Big Bertha, my monster suitcase, across the bumpy courtyard as Aunt Mill led the way. She called out, “Sief,” and like magic, this scrawny, dark-haired, Raggedy-Andy of an eleven-year-old came loping out from the opposite side of the courtyard. “We need help with the suitcase,” Aunt Mill said.

We entered an archway and climbed these crooked steps, so worn they sagged in the middle. Aunt Mill hobbled up, hanging on to the rail. Sief tried to grab Big Bertha out of my hand.

“I can do it alone, twerp-o,” I said.

Aunt Mill looked down from the landing above and said something in French. Sief promptly let go of the handle and went down and started pushing from below. We clunk-clunked up a flight and then he started easing off without appearing to, then pushing again, easing off, pushing, till I almost fell on him. He grinned.

I shoved Big Bertha down on him. He missed a step and knocked his chin. I yelled, “Hey, watch out, klutzoid.”

Sief just grinned again. Eventually we got to a landing ten thousand steps up. Aunt Mill had the door to her apartment open and while I rolled Bertha in, she gave Sief some money. I wanted to barf.

When I asked Aunt Mill about him, she said Sief was half Algerian, half Mohican, and half Puritan. When I asked her what that meant she said Sief’s mother died last year and that he and his father lived across the courtyard and that he was a very sweet boy and spoke fairly good English and that if I didn’t insist on trying to kill him with my suitcase we might become friends.

She must have eyes in the back of her head.

Aunt Mill's apartment was ancient. The living room had a marble fireplace and walls with carved wood that looked like decorations on a cake. There were books everywhere: books in cases that ran to the ceiling and books piled in corners around potted plants and books on the faded green couch and books piled on the fireplace and in the fireplace too, old books, new books, French books, art books. You could build a castle with all the books.

The living room gave into a dining room with another fireplace and a round dusty table ringed with dusty gold chairs. A chandelier with real candles instead of light bulbs hung down from a plaster rosette in the ceiling. Across the hall was a tiny kitchen with hardly anything in it and down the hall were three bedrooms, one for her, one for me and the last for her study. The study had more books, along with scrolls and charts and piles of paperwork, plus, in a corner, a ginormous steel safe.

“What's that for?” I asked.

“It's just an antique,” said Aunt Mill. “Too heavy to move, so there it sits.”

2. Le Saint Gervais

Aunt Mill woke me at seven in the morning, Paris time. I'd been asleep about six seconds. She said she was taking me to her school to do some testing. I had five minutes to shower and throw clothes on. The shower heater either scalded you or doused you with ice water, with no in between, unless you had the touch of a safecracker. Then we sat down to warm milk with coffee, and yesterday's stale baguette with jam. Aunt Mill smoked half a cig by the open kitchen window, telling me the whole time what a disgusting habit it was.

I borrowed an umbrella for the dash to the Metro. She kept a dozen in a brass holder by her door—a good thing because it is always raining in Paris. Always.

The sky was dead-mouse gray. Wet cobbles glistened under vapor lights. People walked hunched over, dragging on their cigarettes, bumping you off the sidewalk as they passed. Handing me a Metro ticket, Aunt Mill passed through the fare-barrier and mashed into the morning crowd. I had no idea where we were going but it was pretty cool to be on the real Paris Metro, even if everyone was churlish. Aunt Mill is not a morning person, but I didn't realize that at the time, so her silence on the ride over made me feel like I was something heavy she had to lug around.

A brass plaque marked the entrance to the Embassy School. Early kids, dressed in school blazers, said "*Bonjour Madame Millicent*" as we came in. They eyed me, exuding posh.

I got whisked into a cubical with a glass wall and four computers, next to the principal's office, while Aunt Mill talked with an office bee named Mademoiselle Villand, a young woman with angelic hair and a cherub face who could roast you alive with her booming voice, which she used on kids running in the hall.

Aunt Mill went off to teach. Mademoiselle Villand set me up to take tests on a computer. The keyboard was different than an American keyboard, with the letters all mixed up, but luckily it was just scroll and click and fill in A, B, C, or D—same hyper-boring tests we take at Fairfield, except the computer would lock you out when your time was up. I had a headache three minutes in.

Mademoiselle Villand came in occasionally to check that I still had a pulse, and to set up the next torture session. Normally, I would have thrown myself out a window, but I was so jet-lagged I zombied through. At noon, Aunt Mill and I walked around the corner to a tiny café where she had a twenty-minute chat in French with the guy who ran the place, while I sat listening, understanding not a word.

After lunch it was more torture. I even took a French test, which was a total joke. Then I waited for Aunt Mill, watching the rain stop and start, watching the lead-colored daylight disappear, watching knots of students traipsing out, gabbing in French and English and even Japanese.

I must have fallen dead asleep. Aunt Mill woke me and apologized for taking so long and asked if I wanted to grab a bite of dinner. Sitting up on the bench outside the principal's office, wiping drool off my cheek, I had to think for a few seconds where I was.

We metroed back to Aunt Mill's apartment and ate at a place around the corner, called Café Saint Gervais. She talked with *both* owners of this place. The man shook my hand. The woman kissed my cheeks and spoke English to me, telling me that her name was Rose, and that my name, Daisy, meant *Marguerite* in French, so we were both flower-named girls, the best kind of girls in the world, and that if I ever needed anything, or was hungry, or wanted to get out of the rain, or wanted a *chocolat chaud*, or anything, just anything, I should stop in and ask for Rose.

Le Saint Gervais was kind of a dump really, unless you think of grungy furniture from the 70s as a trend. But Madame Rose knew how to cook. We had *saumon rillettes* and *gratin dauphinois* and *rôti d'agneau aux herbes* and then *figues chaudes à la mousse d'amandes*. I remember all that because Madame Rose wrote the names of everything down when I asked her to. She was excited that I was excited about the food, but who wouldn't be—it was amazing. Aunt Mill ordered a bottle of wine and poured some in my glass. I told her I was just a kid and didn't drink wine, but she said that kids in France could drink a little wine under adult supervision and that it was a shame not to drink wine with such a good meal. It didn't taste that great, kind of sour, with a worn out smell. I had more fun swirling it in my glass the way Aunt Mill did.

She asked me to tell the whole story about Lucia and Martin Blidenbock, including about punching Martin, so I did. She laughed. "Good for you. Unofficially of course," she said. She started talking about crazy things that she and my mom did when they were young but she made me swear never to tell anyone. I had no idea my mom was such a terror.

At the end of the meal, when we were stuffed to our eyeballs and Aunt Mill was drinking an espresso, she pulled out the scores from the tests I'd taken. She looked them over, sighed gravely, and said, "A French scholar you are not, mademoiselle."

She said I tested well in reading comprehension, vocabulary, history, geography, and life sciences. "Math, as predicted, is a problem and your French, shall we say, is robustly remedial, contrary to your mother's claim."

"She probably fibbed about that. I've never taken a day of French."

"Yes, well, I suspect at that point in the conversation she was afraid I'd refuse to take you on because of the language barrier."

"So am I going to the Embassy School?"

"Heavens, no. That place is for diplomat brats. You'd wilt there. Your parents and I agreed that I'd home school you. But you're already testing past tenth grade in most subjects now. You'll need to take the sixth grade accreditation exam in the spring but you could pass that tomorrow. So here's what I propose:

"For math, I'll give you a set of problems each morning. After you complete them, whether it takes five minutes or five hours, the rest of the day is yours. However, you can do nothing else until they're completed. You'll also be required to read independently, picking a book from my library or, in any case, a book I approve of, which can be almost anything, as long as it's not completely idiotic. We'll call that your honors independent study. In addition, you'll be required to keep a journal on Paris—on what you've seen, heard, smelled, read about, what puzzles you about the city, what annoys you, what the people look like, eat, wear, what the design of the city tells you, and so forth. You will be required to write at least five pages a week in this journal, but I

suspect that won't be too great a burden for you. In the meantime, I'll look into an appropriate language school."

I nudged a bit of almond cream around on my plate. "So, when you say 'the rest of the day is mine' you mean like I have to sit in the apartment all day or am I going to be at the school with you?"

"Neither. Of course, you can sit in the apartment if you choose, since it is technically part of Paris. Your journal will get very tedious if you do."

"So I just wander around?"

"If you choose. However, having a plan or goal each day will probably make it more interesting."

"What if I get lost?"

"I'll give you a *Paris Par Arrondissement* map book, and also a cell phone, in case you really get stuck. Of course, getting lost is one of the best ways of discovering things. Plus, as you've probably observed, there are people living here, and though they speak French, they're quite helpful, especially to polite little girls."

"Won't the police arrest me for cutting school?"

"Why would they? You're a foreign tourist."

This was clearly too good to be true. I knew there had to be a catch.

"What's the catch?" Aunt Mill said.

"Huh?"

"You're thinking, 'what's the catch?'"

I nodded. Was she a mind reader too?

“Well, you will have to finish your math homework each day, which won’t always be easy, but aside from that, we’re in a city with 204 museums, 407 gardens, 7,000 cafes, 60,000 shops. There’s a historic plaque on every other corner. Let’s take where we are now. You’re dining in a restaurant, a seemingly unremarkable one, named after a Roman martyr from the Second Century, when Jesus was still considered the hero of a fringe cult. Victor Hugo bought his daily bread around the corner. Louis, Duke of Orleans, was murdered a few steps down the way, sparking seventy years of war. Up the street, the Knights Templar had their headquarters, until they were all arrested, accused of witchcraft, and burned at the stake. This city is literally an open book, with infinite pages, written in code, waiting to be deciphered. Now some people, perhaps most even, wouldn’t know how to take advantage of that. But based on what I know of you, I think you will.”

I said nothing. I was stunned. Aunt Mill paid the bill and said a chatty goodbye to Rose and her husband. We all double-cheek-kissed, an awkward thing for me, which made them laugh.

Aunt Mill and I walked home under umbrellas, everything varnished by the rain, then chuffed up the bowed steps to her apartment. I got ready for bed. She went into her study, “to do some late work.” I had a long look in the bathroom mirror after I brushed my teeth. Sometimes you just look in the mirror and don’t recognize the person, or don’t like them particularly, or wonder why they do certain things, like punch people in the nose and refuse to telephone their mother.

When I came out of the bathroom, I saw Aunt Mill seated at her desk, examining an old piece of paper—like really old, like the kind pirates made their maps on—with a magnifying glass.

“Good night, Aunt Mill,” I said.

She looked up. “Night, Daisy. Get a good rest now.”

I nodded and padded off down the hall, brain not quite registering what I’d seen until after I’d turned away: there was that safe, steel door swung open, stacked high with old papers like the one Aunt Mill was eyeing with her glass. The safe might be an antique and “too heavy to move” but it was doing more than just sitting there.