

**An Excerpt from *Godmother: An Unexpected Journey, Perfect Timing,  
and Small Miracles*, by Odile Atthalin**

It was the year 1943. The Nazi army had occupied Paris and half of France for two years. We had moved to Normandy. Before the war we lived a very comfortable life in Paris, where I was born. Before the war and after the war, that's how we kept track of time. After the war, we would return to our Paris home.

We had to leave Paris. My mother hated the German occupation, seeing German soldiers everywhere grabbing the best of everything. Everyone lived in constant humiliation, fear, and outrage, and my mother could not tolerate it any longer. And it was hard to raise four kids, ages seven, five, four, and two, on very meager food tickets, unless you bought food on the black market, which my mother, although she could have afforded it, would never do.

Why Normandy? My father's parents, wealthy upperclass Parisians and landowners, had a family country home, called "Le Château" by the locals, in a remote part of lower Normandy, about sixty miles inland from the coast.

The estate comprised acres of forests and rich grazing land, including three farms and their farmers raising herds of cows, where we would get our milk, eggs, butter, cream, cheese, and even meat at the annual killing of the pig. Plus there were big vegetable gardens and apple, pear, and plum orchards.

We used to spend one summer month there every year. My mother had become familiar with the farmers and their families. In 1941, the family mansion having been confiscated by the Germans, the farmers helped her find a small house for rent on the outskirts of a nearby village called Les Aspres. We moved in, my mother, the four kids, and our nanny, while my father kept his job in Paris.

In Normandy, a whole new life started for me. By then I was six years old, the eldest, a strong, capable little girl, serious and a good learner, thoughtful and quiet.

In Paris I had gone to a big private Catholic school, where I wore a uniform, went to chapel every day, and after school walked, holding Nanny's hand, straight back to our home apartment.

My life in Paris was structured and supervised, while here in Normandy I had lots of freedom. I went to the small village school by myself, walking over a mile of dirt road through woods and meadows, rain or shine. I skipped down the hill, then across the creek in the middle of the village, walked up the hill on the other side, and arrived at school warm and exhilarated. We had only one mistress for twenty kids, all in the same room. I could memorize anything, poems, songs, history, math. Our mistress loved me and I loved school. I discovered how much I liked doing things on my own.

"*Tu es devenue indépendante,*" my mother said and seemed pleased. The move had been a boon for me.

As for my mother, she was pregnant again, her fifth pregnancy, although she was only twenty-nine years old. She kept talking about it. I had become her confidante. In Paris my mother had her fashionable social life and had no need for me. She had no time and no interest for her children. The nanny did all the caring. Here in Les Aspres my mother was alone. In the village everybody knew her and she knew everybody, but she had no friends. She was from Paris, and most of them had never been to Paris.

She talked about the baby she was carrying all the time. She wanted a boy. She did not want another girl.

“The first girl was OK, one daughter is good, *ma petite Odile*,” she told me, “but three more girls,” she sighed heavily.

“I want a son,” she repeated over and over again, “*un garçon . . . un fils . . . je veux un fils.*”

She was cranky, often upset, yelling at my sisters and also at our nanny, and even at our cook.

“He is getting heavy,” she said, holding her belly. “He is kicking, he is going to be a strong boy. One more month,” she added. She always said “he” when she talked about the baby. Soon he would be born here in the house; the village midwife would come and assist her. She prepared the crib. She showed me all the baby clothes she had saved from the previous baby, my third sister, who was only two years old.

It was late October, getting cold and damp. When I walked back from school, it was almost dark, and I always came in through the kitchen door. Before I could step in, our cook shouted, “*Enlève tes galoches.*” (Take off your boots.) Then she gave me hot milk with chicory. I sat at the kitchen table. The kitchen was the warmest room in the house, except for the nursery room where my sisters stayed with our nanny. My mother came to the kitchen, sat with me, and started talking about the baby:

“*Tu vas avoir un petit frère,*” she told me. (You are going to have a baby brother.)

And the cook repeated, “*Oui, ta maman, elle va avoir un petit garçon et toi t’auras un petit frère.*” (Your mom is going to have a little boy, and you will have a baby brother.)

Soon it was November, time to set up the crèche. Every year my mother would build, on a table, a small mountain with pieces of cardboard, and add a few rocks and twigs from the garden. Inside the mountain, she made a little cave, and inside the cave, she placed the small statues, the same every year, *les santons*, as we called them. There was Mary, Joseph, a donkey, an ox, a few shepherds, and a few sheep. Between Mary and Joseph, there was a small manger; it was empty. The *santons* were all staring at the empty manger. They were waiting for the baby to arrive, just like us. We were all waiting for the baby to arrive.

Every night, before going to bed, we gathered around the crèche, staring at the empty manger, just like the staring *santons*, and we sang:

*Venez Divin Messie,  
Sauvez nos jours infortunés  
Venez Source de vie  
Venez, venez, venez.*