
*After the death of Alice’s father, her mother planned to take the family to live in France.*

I imagined a house where we would be together near the water. . . . I can see myself there underneath a palm tree. I will be a French girl, like Madeline in the Madeline books who lives in an orphanage with other girls and walks in a straight line and gets a visit from Miss Clavel when she goes into the hospital with appendicitis. (p. 31)

*Alice watches the funeral of President Kennedy on television.*

The newscasters commented on the world leaders as they walked down Pennsylvania Avenue. De Gaulle, the president of France, floated over the rest. He wore a hat that reminded me of Abraham Lincoln’s stovepipe hat, only shorter. Instead of a band all around it there was a visor in front that stuck out in line with his enormous nose. The newsmen commented on the special relationship of de Gaulle and Jacqueline Kennedy, who was able to speak to him in fluent French. (p. 32)

*Alice remembers one of her first French teachers in Minnesota, Madame Holmgren.*

She was a tired dowdy woman with very black hair, beige clothes, and an almost sickly pale skin punctuated by a mole.... [She] was an object of extreme fascination because of the hair on her legs—dark whiskery hair, the first hair any of us had ever seen on a grown woman’s legs. (p. 126)

I knew what it was supposed to sound like. I heard Holmgren’s “r.” And I knew that by comparison our resistant “r” was a flat, closed-off smashed version of the truer sound. So let’s say I did decide to risk it, make it ok, this foreign “r.” I still had a dilemma: the American “r” sounded stupid, Midwestern, but to get the French one right I knew there would be an awkward apprenticeship where it would come out all slobby and wrong. Like kissing a boy with braces on. (p. 128)

*Alice remembers the time she spent in a Boarding School in Switzerland in the suburbs of Geneva.*

Every morning those sounds woke me up. I understood more and more until I could anticipate the morning greeting of the Swiss news, and lip synch, word for word, the standard formulae. I got used to looking at people from a distance, trying to figure out what language they were speaking by the merest shadow of sound floating my way or by their gestures. I always had five or six new words on a personal in-progress list. Each time I heard one of the words on my list, I would notice the context and try to figure out the meaning. When I thought I had the meaning I would wait for the word to come up again, so I could check if my meaning was still right. Finally, I’d try the word out to see if a strange look came over the face of the person I was talking to. If it didn’t, I knew I was home free. I had a new word.
I started thinking of my ear as something strong, and precious. I couldn’t stand Chris’s strutting and whispering, so when the girl in the room next door moved upstairs I moved into her old room, where everyone, a Palestinian and an Italian and a French girl, spoke French all of the time. I had to bottom bunk again, and I lay under the yellow and white striped covers and listened.

My ear was getting stronger and stronger. (pp. 47-48)

I look back at my handwriting from that year, in an assignment notebook that never got thrown out. It is small and round and perfect, no variation from letter to letter. Mostly what I have on record are conjugations. In basement study hall before breakfast I copied verb conjugations like a monk. I had a French Grammar book, Bled’s Spelling, and I did extra exercises for the exceptions to the rules. I did this work the way someone would run a marathon, waiting to hit the wall at twenty miles, feeling the pain of the wall and running through it. I liked to work before breakfast. I thought I memorized better when my head was light. (p. 52)

I had come from a house where the patterns had broken down and the death that had broken them was not understood. Now I loved the loudspeaker and the study hall and the marble floor because they made me feel hard and controlled and patterned; the harder I felt the more I felt the sorrowful world behind me grow dim and fake and powerless. (p. 53)

I went into the village in search of French. I went to the train station. I bought tickets to Geneva, “aller et retour à Genève”—that is what you had to say to get a round trip ticket. I loved to let it roll off of my tongue, “aller et retour” in one drum roll, “to go and return.” I bought tickets just to say it. Most of what I did, in town, I did in order to speak. Complicated conversations at the Tabac, the newsstand, the grocery. (p. 53)

Alice’s American classmates at the Swiss boarding school had all grown up in a French-speaking country.

When called on, they spoke French effortlessly, but begrudgingly—“if you insist, if you insist . . .” I could practically hear it under their breath as they tossed off the sentence. They were bored, the students on the left-hand row, how could they be bored? Frichot, the teacher, calls on me. I feel as if I’m on a stage, the lights go down and the desks disappear. The spot is on me. I’m poised as I speak my lines from the play we’re reading. (pp. 53-54)

Alice recalls learning the correct pronunciation of the French “r”.

So that feeling of coming onto the “r” like a wall was part of feeling the essence of my American speech patterns in French, feeling them as foreign and awkward. I didn’t know at the time how important it was to feel that American “r” like a big lump in my throat and to be dissatisfied about it. Feeling the lump was the first step, the prerequisite to getting rid of it. (p. 54)
I looked up at my teacher, M. Herve Frichot, former colonial school teacher from Madagascar. He had a goatee and glasses with thick black frames. He was a skeptic but he was looking at me now with deep respect. He hadn’t thought I could do it. He said, “You’ve done it.” He added: “Vowels next.” But that was minor. I wasn’t worried about the vowels because I knew that since I had gotten the “r,” I had already started opening up my vowels. I could perfect them with the same method I had used for the “r”: First feeling them wrong, like an impediment, feeling them again and again in their wrongness and then, one day, opening up and letting the right sound come. Relaxing. The “r” was the biggest hurdle; my system was now in place. (p. 55)

Alice recalls the way that she studied French in Switzerland.

That was what woke me up: absorbing a new reality, repeating it, describing it, appreciating it. I felt a pull toward learning I hadn’t felt since the fifth grade: quiet mastery of a subject. Knowing I knew the material, that I had it down. Knowing how to find out more. Inventing methods for listening and making them habits. Feeling a kind of tickle in my ear at the pleasure of understanding. Then the pleasure of writing down what I had heard and getting every detail, every accent mark right.

The French have a verb for the kind of work I did at the Swiss school: *bosser*, which comes from a verb meaning “hunched” and means hunkering down to work, bending down over some precious matter and observing it. (pp. 55-56)

Alice returned home to Minnesota after a year in Switzerland.

In June I took the plane home. I could feel the French sticking in my throat, the new muscles in my mouth. I had my ear open, on the plane, for the sounds of anyone speaking French because those were my sounds now. I was full of French, it was holding me up, running through me, a voice in my head, a tickle in my ear, likely to be set off at any moment. A counter language. When I got off the plane the American English sounded loud and thudding-like an insult or lapse of faith. I would have to go hunting for French sounds, if I wanted to keep going. (p. 70)

Alice fell in love during her junior-year study abroad in Bordeaux.

I went to classes, part of our six-week orientation to French Culture. In class I spent a lot of time with my head on the desk, nothing but André in it. I went to language lab for phonetic testing and they said I was starting to get the regional Gascon accent in my “r”s, I should watch out. I had been studying André too hard. (p. 85)

This should have been my first clue that what I really wanted from André was language, but in the short run all it did was make me feel more attached to him, without knowing why I was attached. I can still hear the sound he made when he read my love letter: “T,t,t,” with that little ticking sound French people make by putting the tips of their tongues on the roof of their mouths—a fussy, condescending sound, by way of saying, “that’s not how one says it.” What I wanted more than anything, more than André even, was to make those sounds, which were the true sounds of being French, and so even as he
was insulting me and discounting my passion with a vocabulary lesson, I was listening and studying and recording his response. (p. 86)

*André tells Alice that he wants a woman he can express himself with. He says she understands his words but not his language.*

That week I kept running over his speech in my mind. What was the difference between his words and my words, his world and my world? When I said a French word, why wasn’t it the same as when he said one? What could I do to make it be the same? I had to stick it out with him, he was transmitting new words to me every day and I needed more. In fact, while Barbara and Buffy and Kacy (André dubbed us “l’équipe”—the team) rolled their eyes about what a raw deal I was getting from this creep, I was all the more determined to be with him. He was in all my daydreams now. I wanted to crawl into his skin, live in his body, be him. The words he used to talk to me, I wanted to use back. I wanted them to be my words. (pp. 87-88)

*Alice becomes entranced when she reads “Voyage au bout de la nuit” (Journey to the End of the Night) by Louis-Ferdinand Céline.*

What exquisite misery I felt! Disconnected, not belonging, desiring every house, imagining every happy scene behind every stone wall, taking in the lewd empty glances, given and received. Céline could express it all in a sentence through the sound of his words as much as their meaning. When reading him I luxuriated in despair, dark thoughts; and a commitment to eternal exile. (pp. 105-106)

That was only part of what drew me to Céline. The rest had to do with what happened while I was reading him, the music I felt in my heart, a sense of lightness and magic, as well as a total confidence in this writer’s knowledge of the depths of individual human suffering. Our literature professor wanted us to hear that music.... (pp. 107-108)

*Céline made me want to write.* (p. 109)

*After graduating with a Ph.D. from Yale, Alice’s first job is teaching French at a state university in the South.*

I had to teach first-year French to students who didn’t want to be there but had to be, because it was a requirement. I went home every night and read the want ads just to know that there were jobs in the world other than the one I had. I saw French mistakes I had never even dreamed of—letters that didn’t exist, words that bore no relation to any language. I graded and wept. (p. 165)

*Alice reflects on life as a professor in a French Department at an American university.*

French colleagues are invariably more generous in assessing the language skills of their American colleagues than we Americans are when we talk about each other (“Really, you know, her French isn’t very good”). American French professors, they say, are much too self-conscious about petty details of linguistic performance, which have nothing to do with real intellectual life.
Easy for *them* to say: those details are our second identity. (p. 180)

*Alice reflects on what learning French meant for her.*

Learning French was connected to my father, because French made me absent the way he was absent, and it made me an expert the way he was an expert. French was also a response to my adolescence, a discipline to cover up the changes in my body I wanted to hide. (pp. 203-204)

Why do people want to adopt another culture? Because there’s something in their own they don’t like, that doesn’t *name them*. (p. 209)

When I was an adolescent, French was my storehouse language. I collected secrets in French; I spoke to myself in French. I know now that my passion for French helped me put off what I needed to say, in English, to the people around me. (p. 214)

Why did I hide in French? If life got too messy, I could take off into my second world. Writing about it has made me air my suspicions, my anger, my longing, to people for whom it’s come as a total surprise. There was a time when I even spoke in a different register in French—higher and excited, I was sliding up to those high notes in some kind of a hyped-up theatrical world of my own making. (p. 216)

Learning French and learning to think, learning to desire, is all mixed up in my head, until I can’t tell the difference. French is what released me from the cool complacency of the R Resisters, made me want, and like wanting, unbuttoned me and sent me packing. French demands my obedience, gives me permission to try too hard, to squinch up my face to make the words sound right. French houses words like “existentialism” that connote abstract thinking, difficulties to which I can get the key. And body parts which I can claim. French got me away from my family and taught me how to talk. Made me an adult. And the whole drama of it is in that “r,” how deep in my throat, how different it feels. (pp. 140-141)