

Your BFF, Reporting from Paris

FROM: COOLGIRL517
TO: ANNIE.BEACHAMBELL
DATE: MONDAY JUNE 26 05:45:17
SUBJECT: Marie, me, Paris

Hi Annie,

I wasn't sure I'd finish the warehouse project in Alsace in time for this side trip to Paris, but yes here I am! And I saw Marie!

I'm sitting here at the Charles de Gaulle airport with a *café au lait*. (NOT from Starbucks.) Got up at 3 AM, breezed through security, and now I've got maybe 20 minutes so I figured I'd send you a quick note. Since it's near midnight in Hartford, you'll probably be reading this over your juice and granola several hours from now, and at that point I'll likely be back in the good old USA. Or close enough.

Sorry I haven't been better with posts and pics and emails. The past week has been REALLY crazy. Jessica, my manager, was down with the flu so John, Jessica's manager, put ME in charge of getting the stock locator system online at the new warehouse in Vieux Thann. The tech part went okay but then I had to train the staff to use it and

most of them DO NOT speak English. Jessica speaks French very well.

Moi? Non!

I really thought Madame Bissonette's French class from junior year would be more helpful! Remember when we thought we were so cool, singing Claire de Lune and asking each other "*Où est le hotspot wifi le plus proche?*" Which was so lame, asking a stranger where the nearest wifi spot is. Just pull up the app, right??!

So I was absolutely floundering and stuttering the whole time at work. And the natives in Alsace speak French with a GERMAN accent, so I was REALLY lost. One night a waiter asked me "two people for dinner?" and I thought he was asking if I wanted sauce with my fish. *Personnes/poissons*, get it? Never mind, you had to be there.

Other revelations: Computer keyboards are AZERTY not QWERTY. The locals don't start work until 10 am but then they usually work until 6 or 7 or even later. The restaurants don't open for dinner until 7:30 or 8:00 pm. Twice, I missed dinner entirely because I took a nap after work and didn't wake up until midnight. And you have to bring your own washcloth, because the hotels don't provide them. Bidet, *oui*. Facecloth, *non*.

It was exhausting but I got everything up and running by Friday, on schedule, and John said I did great. So yes, I got to spend the weekend in Paris!

So, like 8 years after she moved here, I got to see Marie again.

I remember how devastated we were, when she told us she'd be moving at the end of sophomore year. "BFFs 4ever" is a tough commitment when one of the tribe moves to the other side of the ocean. The three of us cried for days. I tried to convince my parents to adopt her, so she could stay and graduate with us at good old Simsbury H.S. Of course, HER parents weren't too keen on that idea.

Marie was SO angry about moving again. When she was the new girl in our sixth grade, I think she'd already lived in three other countries. She was born in Italy (Tuscany?), then she lived in Berlin and London before moving to Connecticut. Her dad was an industrial engineer. Still is, I guess, and he goes where the jobs are. For Marie it must have been like being an Army brat but worse, with no other Army brats to sympathize with you.

True confession: After I got over the shock of her moving, I was thrilled to know someone living in Paris! We all pinky-swore to email and Skype and post lots of photos on snapchat and facebook, and save up for the grand trip. And her mom also promised that Marie would back to visit at Christmas.

For a few months at least, we were pretty good about staying connected, weren't we? When you and I signed up for French in junior year, we were sure we'd get to Paris on a class trip.

But you dropped the course and I never could figure out how to raise enough money to go on the class trip.

And Marie never came back. I guess, after having been Italian and German and English and American, she had to become French.

I don't think you heard from Marie after you married Mark and started nursing school, right? I stayed in touch a little longer. She'd gone off facebook but I sent her an email and some euros when she got married to that guy she was so hot for in senior year. That was maybe five years ago and I can't remember if I got an email back, but I know she got the money. The last email I got from her, maybe three years ago, she'd just had a baby. A girl, I think. I'd emailed her back to say congratulations, but the email bounced back. So I wasn't sure if I could even find her.

This trip came up so suddenly! I didn't know if I'd have time to stop in Paris. This was all pretty impulsive and I didn't really think it would work out. But I had to try.

I finally tracked her down through her parents. Surprise! They still live at the same address from eight years ago so I left a message. Marie phoned me at work last Wednesday! And we had this really hurried, disjointed conversation. She said she'd book a room for me in a budget hotel, in a part of Paris called Porte du Clichy. It wasn't fancy, she said, but it would be "better than camping in your dad's pickup."

Remember??!!

That weekend at scout camp when we were 14, when a storm blew the tents down in the dark? We dragged a soggy mattress into the bed

of Dad's truck and climbed in under the camper cap. I was such a wuss, whimpering and crying about how the truck would blow over or we'd get hit by lightning. You said we should stuff our dirty socks and underwear in the gap at the top of the tailgate, to keep the rain from blowing in. So practical.

Marie just laughed and made up a crazy story about bears sniffing around the truck, which scared me even more.

Nothing ever scared Marie. I was in awe of her. You were like everyone's big sister, but she was like Wonder Woman, totally fearless.

On the phone on Wednesday, I reminded her about the bears, but she didn't laugh. She says she's "pale and flabby," a real city girl, and she doesn't get the chance to camp or hike or play softball or swim now. Her life is too serious, she said.

Marie told me that all of her time, outside of work, is taken up by figuring out how to avoid Ludovic, the boyfriend she moved in with when she was 17. They married when she was 19. Now she's just trying to make ends meet and take care of Lisette, her 3-year-old daughter.

She spoke really fast and said to listen carefully, because she couldn't call me back and I couldn't call her. "This is a borrowed phone, I don't have a phone right now. And I don't have a place where you can come visit me. When Ludovic is away, sometimes I stay in his apartment and sometimes Lisette and I stay with friends. Mostly, it depends on where Ludovic is or isn't. The way things are,

it's not so good if he and I meet. I try to arrange my life to stay out of his way."

She spoke so quickly, as if she had only a few minutes to explain and she needed to stuff 8 years of life into a 5-minute phone call.

Remember Ludovic, that hot boyfriend? We saw Instagram pictures. She met him about a month after she moved to Paris. She was so in love with him. He understood her when her parents were so mean, etc. She was perpetually upset with her parents, but we knew she'd been angry with them for years.

And now she needs to get out of the marriage. The way she described it, she's nearly homeless!

I told her how sorry I was, I didn't know. I could almost hear her shrug. "It's been going on for a while. I'm trying to get a divorce, but it's complicated," she said. Then she added, "You can't come to me, so I will call for you at the hotel. Lisette and I will show you our city! Saturday morning at ten. Kaitie, I cannot wait to see you. I am so happy to be speaking English!"

And then she sounded almost happy, more like the Marie we knew back home. She still has that slightly husky voice that makes you think she smokes, which she doesn't. I remember I was embarrassed sometimes by her gravelly voice and that big noisy laugh.

Late Friday evening, I wrapped up the warehouse project and turned in the tiny mobile breadbox that my co-workers insisted was a

standard-issue rental car. And I took a very fast, scary taxi ride to L'hotel Primavère, Boulevard de Douaumont, 17 arrondissement. (That just rolls off the tongue, oui? I love the sound of the language, though I don't always know what I'm saying.)

Marie said she'd found me something cheap and close to wherever she was staying, so this is it: a tiny, grubby room on the fourth floor of a very old hotel. Creaky elevator, dirty beige walls, cracked doorframe, cloudy bathroom mirror and a single, visibly lumpy twin bed. (Not kidding.) On the wall, a faded picture of a covered bridge. (Are covered bridges even a thing here?)

It all smelled tired, not dirty so much as earthy, with a hint of mildew. A little sweat, some old cheese, an undertone of rancid cooking oil.

The single unwashed window looked out on a small vacant lot, perhaps once a park, where weeds flourished over bare dirt and a dozen boys kicked a half-inflated soccer ball. On a sagging wooden bench by the sidewalk, an old woman dressed in black rags was dozing among a pile of plastic shopping bags. This was definitely not the high-rent district.

Early Saturday morning, Marie appeared in the tiny hotel lobby, pushing a rusted fold-up stroller with her little girl asleep in the canvas sling seat.

Major hugs! Lots of How long it's been, and Can't believe I'm seeing you again after all these years.

I told Marie she looked wonderful, but I lied.

Her face was pasty white, all puffy and tired. Those amazing green eyes were disguised in heavy mascara and bruised-looking shadow. The long curly chestnut hair was loose on her shoulders like always, but it was limp and tangled, smelling like old cigarette smoke.

Annie, she looks old! Old and worn out, much older than 24.

And the clothes. Remember how in school she wore cargo pants, plaid shirts and Doc Martens, because she wanted to be a forest ranger? We teased her and called her Ranger Rick. She just rolled her eyes and laughed.

I know she's having a hard time now, but her clothes were just awful. A wrinkled, skin-tight, coral miniskirt. An off-the-shoulder peasant blouse, that might have been white at one time. No bra. Her legs were bare and scratched, and her feet looked swollen in scuffed-up, pointy-toed black flats. She looked like a streetwalker. A much older streetwalker.

I asked if she was going to be comfortable walking around the city in those shoes and that skirt, but she just gave me a very French shrug. This is how she dresses on weekends, she said, when she expects to see Bernard, her new boyfriend. "Bernard is older, nearly forty," she explained, "and he likes me to fit in better with his friends. So for him, I am older. Besides, it is summer. This is what I wear in summer."

Oh Annie, you might have found a few words of wisdom, you who are so good with words! You are always so practical and logical, like the best big sister. I know you're still asleep as I'm writing this but I really wish I could pick up the phone and ask you to help me make sense of it all.

But I was helpless. I couldn't think of a single damn thing to say that wasn't going to sound mean or sad or disappointed.

So we walked out into the City of Lights, me in my walking shoes and baggy cargo shorts, Marie in her street garb and Lisette in a pink sundress, still napping in the stroller.

This was not the Paris I saw on ClassicEurope.com. This was Marie's Paris, one that's full of smelly buses and cracked sidewalks and tired people waiting for the métro, in dim, dirty stations smelling of urine, where the homeless people sleep.

There were notable landmarks, of course. Marie pointed out where that terrorist bomb exploded in the métro last autumn. She showed me the small park where she had a dogwalker job one autumn, and I noted the amazing amounts of dogshit fermenting in the flowerbeds and gutters.

I glimpsed the Eiffel Tower from a distance, and at one point Marie noted that the Louvre was just a few blocks away. She explained that it would be hard to take the stroller into those popular places, and besides they cost money. My budget wasn't THAT

tight, but I figured it would be easier to for her to talk if she chose the itinerary. And it's her city.

We wrestled Lisette's stroller onto the métro and the buses, and walked along old dirty streets until we reached Jardins du Luxembourg, an unexpectedly large and beautiful park. It was hot, but pleasant in the shade. Marie said the oaks in the park remind her of the forests in Connecticut.

Lisette was awake, so Marie chose a quiet patch of worn grass under a big oak tree. She lifted her daughter out of the stroller and pulled a squishy blue ball out of the tote bag slung on the stroller's handles.

Lisette is a quiet, very serious little girl with a pretty, pouty face and gorgeous dark blond curls. At first, she sat quietly, watching the people strolling by while she clutched a worn and much-loved cloth doll, a floppy Mickey Mouse. After a few minutes, she took my hand and asked me to play with her. "*Jouez, jouez,*" she whispered, "*Jouez avec moi, s'il vous plait.*"

Lisette and Mickey Mouse and I rolled the ball back and forth while Marie and I caught up. She asked about your husband and children, my job. Current movies, restaurants, vacations, all the light and easy stuff. She didn't mention her parents or husband, and I didn't ask. I think we were both happy just to be speaking English and sitting in the shade.

We bought *crêpes* from a street vendor and ate them on the grass, then put Lisette back in the stroller and walked some more. By mid-afternoon we were on the Boulevard des Champs Elysées, which is every bit as majestic, crowded and horrifyingly touristy as you'd expect. Elegant cafés next to a 3-story Abercrombie & Fitch, Tiffany's next to McDonald's next to Disney. The sidewalks are crowded with bistro tables, huge topiary urns, and pushcarts full of flowers and croissants. Smoking is banned inside restaurants and bars, so all the smokers sit outside.

Can you believe it, I kept forgetting to take photos! I have only a few of her and Lisette. I did get a selfie of us with l'Arc de Triomphe in the background, which presides over the western end of the Boulevard.

An American tour group overtook us, retirees in matching pastel t-shirts swarming the sidewalk. A stout woman backed into me and stammered an awkward "*Oh dear, pardonnez-moi!*"

"*Eh, ça va,*" I said. "*Pas du tout.*" It's nothing. She assumed I was French! And I guess was, at that moment, which was pretty amusing. People see what they expect to see.

Lisette needed a bathroom break and Marie thought it was time for a drink, so we left the Champs Elysées in search of a less-crowded local café on a side street.

We found something that was more of a bar than a café, down below street level at the bottom of a flight of narrow stone steps.

Marie lifted Lisette out of the stroller and muscled the contraption into its folded position. I took Lisette's hand and we walked carefully down into the darkness of a brasserie.

I stumbled a little going in. Most of the available light came from a flickering TV on the wall above a mirrored bar. A dozen men in rolled-up shirtsleeves slouched at the bar and stared at a futbol game on the screen. Cigarette smoke clung to their clothes and the place smelled of moldy cheese and garlic.

As we walked by the bar, there was a shout and several loud groans. Two men slapped their hands on the bar and faced off, arguing about some player who was doing something remarkably courageous or remarkably stupid with the ball.

Despite their interest in the game, every man changed posture a little when Marie walked past. There were sidelong glances and a few smirks. One saluted her with a beer bottle.

Marie ignored them and scanned the room, looking for a booth along the back wall that would be close to the ladies' room and as far from the bar as possible.

The men did not give me a second glance. In my baggy cargo shorts, oversized t-shirt and practical shoes, I was of no interest.

After a visit to the narrow, dank ladies' room, we slid onto cracked leather seats at a wooden booth. A thin, overly polite waiter in a white shirt and crooked black bow-tie appeared and switched on

the small light on the wall above our table. He gave us a brief, insincere smile when we ordered drinks but no food.

Lisette, happy to be out of the heat and the stroller, knelt on the seat and began to pull toys out of her tote bag. She placed several small plastic figurines of Mickey and Minnie Mouse on a stack of cocktail napkins, and carefully folded the paper over each figure like a swaddling cloth. "*Voici mes bébés,*" she explained solemnly, glancing sideways to see if I was paying attention. She hummed to herself and talked to the toys until our drinks came: tepid white wine for Marie, Orangina for me, citronnade for Lisette.

And Marie talked, finally. I tried to remember every word, so I share it all with you.

"My parents take Ludovic's side," she began.

I glanced at Lisette. "It's okay," Marie said, "She understands a little English, but not much. I do not say bad things about her father in front of her. What he says about me, well—" She took a deep breath.

"You know only a little of this, but I want you to know the whole story.

"When I was seventeen, still hating it here and struggling in school, I left my parents to live with Ludovic. He was my knight in shining armor, who took care of me when I didn't know the language and I had no friends. My father was furious. He wouldn't speak to me for a year.

"You couldn't tell me anything when I was seventeen, I was horrible. You didn't know me then. That's when I stopped writing and texting all my friends. I was so different from the Marie you knew in America! I was obsessed with Ludovic, he was my whole life.

"At first he was good, he helped me learn French and encouraged me to finish high school. I spoke English so it was easy to get a job as a law secretary. We got married. I took a degree in languages at a two-year college, planned to work as a translator. I was so happy to be an adult!

"When I had Lisette, my parents decided that my marriage was probably a good thing and Ludovic must be good for me. At least I was off their hands, no longer their responsibility.

"But by then, he was beating me up almost every Saturday night. Weekly, a regular thing. Even when I was pregnant. He used my pregnancy as an excuse to have other women.

"Before Lisette was born, I told myself it wasn't too bad. But after, he'd come home drunk. He lost his job. He thought I was looking at somebody else. Whatever, he didn't need much of an excuse. He imagined I was laughing at him behind his back, that I had lovers. But I was faithful, a little mouse. I was so busy with my job and my daughter, when could I even look at another man?

"I have been to the hospital five times with broken ribs. Once with a concussion, once with liver damage. By then, I was back in touch with you and Annie, but I couldn't tell you anything about

this. Remember I told you I'd had such a difficult pregnancy, I had to stay in bed for three months? It wasn't the pregnancy, it was what Ludovic had done to me.

"I never told my parents anything bad about Ludovic until a few months ago, when I decided to leave. And they did not believe me.

"You see, for so long, maybe three years, maybe more, I was too proud to admit to anyone what a monstrous mistake I'd made.

"I told them that I wanted a divorce because I couldn't stand his infidelities. In America, there would be no problem. In France, though, they look at you very strange if you say you want a divorce just because your husband has taken a mistress. There must be something wrong with you, not him!"

I felt so sad, and so angry. What could I say? I held her hands and I wanted to cry for her. Marie was way beyond tears. She just stared at the table and twirled the wine glass by its stem. Her eyes were dry and cold.

"So I'm in between homes now. I can't live with Ludovic and my parents won't let me live with them. They say I am lying, because I never told them when it started, years ago. They take Ludovic's side."

"But," she smiled, "there is Bernard. He is a good man. I cannot yet suggest that we live together, but we stay with him on weekends, Lisette and I. He is divorced and he has a seven-year-old

son named Olivier. Bernard and Olivier are very good with Lisette. I have hope."

I got my thoughts together, such as they were. "You and Lisette could leave, live somewhere else," I told her. "You speak four languages, you have a degree, you could get a good job anywhere. I can lend you money and a place to stay. Come back to America. You don't have to stay in Paris, or even in France."

"But if I leave, I cannot come back. Something you don't know—I am still an American citizen and I am not legal here. My parents did not renew my visa when I was in school. That's why I could never visit you, and partly why I married Ludovic.

"Lisette is French and the courts say that Ludovic must be able to see his daughter. Lisette must stay here, so I must also. My lawyer says I can get divorced without being deported, but it must be done carefully and will take time.

"Besides, I am too much French now. Eight years ago, when my parents told me we were moving to France, I felt my world had ended. I wanted only to stay with my friends in America. But I can't go back now. And my parents are still my parents. Their only grandchild is here, my life is here."

The waiter returned and asked if we'd like another drink. Marie shook her head and I dropped some euros on the table.

She gathered up Lisette's toys. "*Nous avons, Lisette,*" she said. "*Alors, alors.*"

The waiter scooped up the euros and smiled his thin false smile. "Ah, Lisette, eh? Tu a un beau Mickey," the waiter said. The smirk widened as he leaned over the table. The little girl paused, not smiling, as the man's forefinger touched the Mickey Mouse figure. His gaze was on Lisette, but he was really talking to Marie.

"Tu es une belle fille," he said. He touched Lisette's cheek lightly, then playfully plucked at the front of her pink sundress and peered down. He said something I didn't catch.

Lisette stared at her mother. She did not cry or whine or twist away. Marie sat very still, watching the man with hard, narrowed eyes.

The waiter chuckled and walked away. Marie exhaled.

"That was creepy," I said. "What was that about?"

"He said, 'where is your bra?' Her *soutien gorge*."

My throat caught and I simply stared at her. The hairs on the back of my neck rose.

Marie hustled Lisette out of the booth. I shivered, then climbed up into the street into warm, slanting sunlight and late afternoon shadows.

"Funny, isn't it," Marie remarked as she yanked the stroller back into its open position, "that the French noun for 'bra' is masculine."

I asked her if she knew the waiter, if she went in there often. I was in over my head and struggling for context. Trying to make sense of what had just happened.

"I do not know him," she said roughly. "I've never been there before. And yes, that was assault, child abuse, wasn't it? No, no. He was just teasing a pretty little girl. It's all in fun, all very French."

"Remember," she said forcefully. "I am illegal. I avoid the police. But rest assured," she added, "I would slit his throat if I could get away with it."

We made our way back to the hotel, not talking much. Before we crossed the street to the hotel's front door, Marie handed a euro note to the old woman in black, still sitting with her bags on the bench. The woman whispered "*merci*" and nodded.

Marie looked at me, gave that shrug, and said, "I don't have much, but she needs it. There but for fortune, yes? At least she has a bench."

Late Saturday night, alone in the hotel room, I was going to call or email you, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out what to say. I was exhausted and went to bed early (on Saturday night! In Paris!) but I couldn't sleep. I spent hours just staring at the cracked ceiling.

Just before noon on Sunday, Marie and Lisette and the new boyfriend, Bernard, arrived in Bernard's father's borrowed car (*une*

petite voiture rouge, as Lisette informed me), so we could all go to brunch in Montparnasse. Bernard speaks no English, and we know my French is abysmal, so Marie translated.

Bernard is a cameraman for one of the state-owned TV channels. He seems to be a good and gentle man. Perhaps he will love them and give them a home, and help Marie become legal.

When they dropped me off at the hotel late Sunday afternoon, she came up to my room for a last hug. "Do not worry about me, Kait," she said. "I am managing and my life will soon be better. Let's really stay in touch this time, yes? I will email, I will get a new address."

I handed her an envelope I'd prepared and told her, "Maybe this will help. Take care of Lisette, use it for her. Or the lawyer. Whatever."

She glanced in the envelope and shook her head. "No, I can't take money. It's not about money."

I'd put my leftover euros in the envelope and then added a withdrawal from the hotel's Euronet ATM. Two withdrawals, since I'd maxed the limit.

I said yeah, maybe money can't fix everything but it sure as hell could give her a few choices.

All she wanted was my understanding and love, she said. "It will take time. And your love. When Lisette is grown, I will come back to

see you. Maybe she will go with me, and I'll show her the oak trees in America."

All I could manage to say was yes, of course, visit when you can.

We hugged again and I pushed her out the door. "Bernard and Lisette are waiting. We're BFFs forever, right?" That sounded lame but I had nothing else. I knew I'd failed her, but I couldn't figure out how to fix it.

I watched from the window as she appeared on the sidewalk below and crossed the street to the parked car, where Bernard and Lisette were waiting in the shade of a plane tree. She paused next to the bag lady on the park bench and handed the envelope to the old woman.

Marie looked up at me and smiled a big, genuine smile. Then she climbed into the little red car with Bernard and Lisette. It eased into the street, and they were gone.

In a few hours, I'll be home in Hartford. I'll tell people that I spent two days in Paris and they'll say, "Oh, Paris! How romantic! Did you climb the Eiffel Tower, visit the Louvre and the Bastille and the Palais Royal? Did you go boating on the Seine?"

"No," I'll say, "there really wasn't time. But the Luxembourg Gardens were nice."

They're calling my flight. Finally.

Hugs from your BFF 4ever, Kaitlyn

