

Prologue

The Summer of 1986

‘It’ll be good for you,’ Mum announced. ‘You’ll improve your French; see a whole different side of life. You don’t want to be stuck in boring old Yorkshire all summer, do you?’

She was applying her make-up at her dressing table mirror: two coats of spidery black mascara, frosted peach lips and a flash of apricot blusher across each cheek. She closed her small, tight mouth and swivelled round on the stool to face me. ‘You might even meet a nice French boy. Oh, I hope so, Lorrie! Just think – your first boyfriend. *That’s* what’s meant to happen on a French exchange!’ She turned back to her mirror, brushing on bronzer until her face took on a shimmery metallic hue.

At sixteen years old, I knew that people only said *it’ll be good for you* when it was something you didn’t want to do. And this was a prime example.

I didn’t want a French boyfriend. I had never been out with anyone in Yorkshire – no one had even shown any interest in kissing me – and I doubted that my arrival in a foreign country would suddenly heighten my allure. I

didn't even want to go to France, *especially* not to a stranger's house. My French was pretty limited. I was fairly confident I could buy a cauliflower or report the presence of cockroaches in my hotel room but as for living in a French family's flat for an entire month? I was fully prepared for no one to understand a single word I said. Although I had tried to convince Mum that I'd learn just as much by studying my textbooks at home, she wouldn't listen. Once she had made up her mind, that was that; firm arrangements were made, my terrible passport picture taken in a photo booth with my hair scraped back so I looked like a potato, and travel tickets booked. Clearly, there was no point in arguing.

There were many other reasons why the thought of going to France scared me:

- I was to fly there, despite having never been on an aeroplane before. In fact, I had never been on *any* mode of transport where a talk on safety procedures was required.
- French girls were thin and sexy – and I was neither of those things.
- French people kissed on both cheeks just to say hello, i.e. much potential for humiliation. It was all about sex. *Everything* was. Even their nouns were either masculine or feminine.

In fact, I knew from occasional glimpses of French films that everyone was always snogging the face off each other. So what would *I* do while all that was going on? I would take photos of churches and force myself to buy things in shops. *Bonjour! Un chou-fleur s'il vous plaît, Madame. Merci, au revoir!* I would

trot back to my penpal's flat with my cauliflower in a basket and sit and write postcards home.

In my own bedroom, which smelt of the tinned meat pie Mum had heated up earlier, I dropped a selection of cheap biros into my suitcase, wishing I was at least travelling with someone. However, despite Mum's insistence on using the term 'French exchange' – implying a load of British kids all singing excitedly on a coach – it was just me, being packed off to a stranger's place, alone.

It had all started when we were allocated penpals through school and I'd ended up with a terse-sounding Valérie Rousseau. Our correspondence so far had been rather basic ('What is your favourite sport?' 'Le ping pong,' I lied, not actually having one). Next thing I knew, Mum was on the phone to Valérie's mother, wafting her cigarette and putting on her Penelope Keith voice with the odd French word flung in: 'Merci, Mrs Rousseau. Lorrie is très excited to come and visit chez vous!' And that was that; the trip was arranged. 'Well, she sounded very nice,' Mum announced. 'Not that she speaks much English, but you'll be *fine*.'

I should also point out that my destination wasn't Paris. It wasn't even the Côte d'Azur, which I'd at least heard of. I was travelling alone to somewhere called The Massif Central, which sounded like an ugly office block with an enormous road system around it. For all we knew, Valérie's parents could have been alcoholics or child molesters – but this was the eighties and no one really worried back then.

I zipped up my suitcase and studied the instructions Mum had hammered out on her manual typewriter:

1. *Overnight coach to London Victoria Station.*
2. *Tube (Victoria Line, light blue, then Piccadilly Line,*

- bit darker) to Heathrow Airport. Check which terminal on your ticket – I think there’s a few?*
3. *Get on plane. If you need anything, ask an air hostess. I’m sure they’re very nice.*
 4. *Arrive at Charles de Gaulle airport. Don’t leave your small bag on the plane and remember to pick up your suitcase from luggage collection thing!*
 5. *Train to Gare du Nord.*
 6. *Go to jail. Go directly to jail! Do not pass go! Do not collect £200!*
 7. *Not really, haha. Just change onto Metro (like tube but French) and proceed to Gare d’Austerlitz.*
 8. *Train to Châteauroux. Valérie’s Mum (Jeanne) will meet you there (you should have phoned her in Paris to say what train. Number is in your purse in case you lose these instructions. DO NOT FORGET TO PHONE!).*
 9. *Have fun!*

I studied the sheet of A4 for the billionth time, prickling with annoyance at the Monopoly reference – as if this were the time for jokes! – and then went to find Mum. She was still in her bedroom, scooshing hairspray all over her coppery curls.

‘Well, I’m all packed,’ I announced.

She beamed at me. ‘Good girl. Exciting, isn’t it?’

I folded up her instructions into a neat little square.

‘I’m a bit nervous actually.’

‘What on earth is there to be nervous about?’

‘Just . . . stuff.’

‘What stuff?’

‘Mum, I hardly speak any French!’

‘You must do. You’re studying it at school, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, but that’s school French, not proper French like people speak in France . . .’

Mum tapped at her hair as if to ensure it was sufficiently crispy. ‘Don’t be so defeatist. You must’ve picked up a *bit* of vocabulary over the years. Now come on, Lorrie – we need to get going. Your coach leaves at ten and you don’t want to miss it, do you?’

What would French teenagers make of me, Lorrie Foster, I wondered, with my jeans from the market and chubby little chipmunk face? I still hadn’t believed that Mum would really send me off to a foreign country on my own. Now the moment was here, I wished I’d packed earlier – and more carefully – as she had been urging me to do, instead of being in denial and leaving it until the very last minute. But it was too late now to try and dress Frenchly. It was too late for anything because I was dragging my suitcase downstairs whilst trying to shake off the feeling that Mum simply wanted me out of the way for a month so she could have boyfriends over, or whatever it was she planned to get up to. My parents had divorced six years earlier. With her make-up and hair freshly done, she was clearly planning a night out after she’d shovelled me onto the overnight coach to London.

‘I wish I’d had the opportunities you have,’ she announced as she drove me, rather speedily, to the bus station. *What, the opportunity for a trip she didn’t want to go on?* I sat in gloomy silence and stared out of the passenger window until she pulled up in the car park. Then, with a powdery cheek held briefly against mine, she bade me goodbye and warned me against the perils of drinking during the day. ‘They love their wine, Lorrie, with *all* meals – even breakfast. Try to fit in with their ways but don’t embarrass yourself, will you?’ I promised

I wouldn't, and as I climbed onto the coach, I turned to give her another wave. She had already gone.

On the journey to London, I pressed myself against the coach's greasy window as the man beside me slurped noisily from a can of beer. Clutching Mum's typed sheet of paper, as if it were instructions for saving a life, I braved the short but turbulent flight. Whilst I had no need for the waxed paper sick bag I found in the seat-back pouch, I was still relieved to know it was there. As reminded by Mum, I dragged my case off the luggage carousel and made my way across Paris, becoming tearful only when I found myself unable to operate a French public telephone. With my ropey vocabulary and lots of miming, I managed to explain my predicament to an elderly lady who obligingly helped me to call Valérie's mum. From there I sped south, the train hurtling between endless rolling fields and towns with all kinds of exotic accents sprinkled like confetti over the letters, until finally I was greeted with two cheek kisses by Jeanne – who had a reassuring plump face – and Valérie, with her stern gaze and long black centre-parted hair, who looked as undelighted by my arrival as I was.

They lived in a sparsely furnished apartment above a bakery: Valérie, her kindly but permanently harassed mother (no dad was mentioned and I didn't like to ask), plus a mysterious older brother, Antoine, whom I had yet to meet. He was away camping with friends, I was told: *le camping*. Hey, I was picking up this French malarkey! In fact, I soon discovered I could cobble entire, rather wobbly sentences together – simply because, reasonably enough, no one spoke much English in a sleepy village in the middle of nowhere. Valérie certainly didn't – or at least, she didn't seem willing to make much effort. I gath-

ered that, as in my situation, her mum had been the one who had been keen for me to visit: ‘I’m happy Valérie has English friend,’ she explained falteringly, while her daughter glared at me over the rim of her mug of *chocolat chaud*.

By the end of week one, my French was severely put to the test with the arrival of my period. Having left it so late to pack, I had forgotten to bring sanitary towels. I’d spotted a box of Lil-Lets on Valérie’s dressing table. However, as I feared tampons – and Valérie – I decided instead to approach her mother: ‘*Er, je suis beaucoup désolé, mais j’ai mon . . .*’ No, no, period would surely be feminine. ‘Ma, er . . .’ Menstrual cycle? My *bicyclette menstruelle*? I stared as she slung three horse – horse! – steaks into a frying pan. ‘Er, avez-vous une serviette, s’il vous plaît?’ I blustered, sweating profusely now.

‘Une serviette?’ Jeanne frowned.

I nodded and smiled. ‘Oui, s’il vous plaît.’

‘Mais il y’a une sur ton lit . . .’

‘Non, non, c’est, uh . . .’ Try as I might, I couldn’t scabble together the vocabulary to explain that I didn’t mean *that* kind of towel.

‘Tu as besoin d’une autre?’ Jeanne asked.

(Almost fainting with relief). ‘Oui!’

She flipped the sizzling meat and took herself off to the airing cupboard, returning with a bath towel with an anchor embroidered on it: ‘Voilà.’

I thanked her warmly and slipped out of the flat, managing to find what seemed to be the sole shop in the village that stocked *des serviettes hygiéniques*.

In a weird way, this incident boosted my confidence. Faced with having to fashion my own sanitary towels out of the virtually non-absorbent loo paper favoured by the Rousseau family – or the belligerent corgi who lived across

the road – I had used my initiative and managed to avert disaster. Now, I felt determined to get to know the languid girls who hung around Valérie’s apartment. Still too shy to join in properly, I remained on the fringes, trying to follow their conversations whilst affecting a bored – rather than panic-stricken – expression. When they were debating what exactly a British pop star might be singing about, I tentatively suggested that I might be able to help by writing out the lyrics. Valérie shrugged and said okay, if I wanted to – and so it began.

While Valérie still seemed to regard me as a particularly unpleasant smell, her friends seemed thrilled by this new service. Soon, I was filling my days by stressfully putting back the needle on Tears for Fears and Duran Duran singles while a clutch of honey-limbed girls fidgeted impatiently on the edge of Valérie’s bed.

Culture Club. Paul Young. The Commodores. Phil Collins (a low point). I realised I could get away with a bit of guesswork – thus completing my lyric sheets faster – and no one would cotton on. In fact, by the end of my second week in France, whilst not exactly popular, I was verging on being accepted by the teenage population of the village.

Perhaps regarding me as a sort of project, Valérie’s best friend Nicole had taken it upon herself to teach me how to apply make-up. Not a frosting of gaudiness, as favoured by my mother, but something altogether more subtle and incredibly flattering. So those gorgeous French girls did wear make-up after all. They just applied it properly, with a light hand. Under Nicole’s stern eye, I learnt that a smudge of pinkish rouge and biscuit-coloured eye shadow, plus a little lip gloss, had a remarkably enhancing effect.

With her baby blue eyes and a fondness for a white

vest and no bra, Nicole was breathtakingly beautiful. I watched with rapt attention as she demonstrated how to curl lashes, and gushed thanks when she allowed me to use her make-up. I loved the smell, the packaging, the enticing shade names: *Bleu nuit*. *Bois de rose*. She gave me a couple of products she no longer used, and I topped up from the meagre selection at the village pharmacy. Life felt brighter. I took to ‘putting on my face’ and offering to run errands for Jeanne, feeling proud of being able to ask for things and trot back to the flat with everything on the list.

And then . . .

Antoine returned from *le camping*: a vision of messy blond hair, a smattering of stubble (manly!) and caramel limbs in battered old khaki shorts and a sun-bleached Depeche Mode T-shirt. Long, sweeping lashes grazed his chocolatey eyes. He smelt of grass and coconut. ‘Hi,’ he said with a smile, dumping a rucksack on the living room rug and kissing my cheeks (ooh!).

I’d been focusing hard on Duran Duran’s ‘A View to a Kill’ but from that moment on, a fortnight into my trip, lyric services ground to a halt. Now, there were far more interesting things to keep me occupied. I’d never known a boy to show much interest in me before, but Antoine seemed to want to know everything about me. Or rather, he wanted to discuss the novels he’d read in English which, to my mind, marked him out as a genius (I had difficulty enough interpreting texts in my own language). His obvious eye-pleasing qualities aside, it was a relief to be able to communicate in my own language instead of forever worrying about using a wrong word.

Appalled by how much time I’d spent holed up in the gloomy apartment, Antoine appointed himself as my tour

guide, and we soon became inseparable. Valérie seemed faintly relieved that I had been taken off her hands, and by now I could pick up enough from her conversations with her friends to know they were having a giggle about her brother and me. I didn't care. Those timely make-up lessons had boosted my fragile confidence, and the village, which had so far failed to make much of an impression on me, suddenly blossomed into the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. Antoine and I sat on the riverbank, chatting whilst dipping our bare toes into the cool water. We lay in a field, looking up at the turquoise sky whilst feasting on bread and cheese. I could hardly believe that such ordinary things could be so delicious.

The sun beamed down on us as Antoine took my hand on a walk through the forest. We were on our way to visit his friend Jacques, whose family kept goats and made cheese from their milk. As we picnicked in their untended garden, Antoine kissed me properly for the first time. It was like an electric current shooting through me. For days, we had just been friends hanging out, and now we were lying in each other's arms, snogging fervently in the long grass while his friend – thank you, Jacques! – wandered off to help his father with the goats. *No one* had kissed me that way, ever. It felt as if my hormones, which had been lying dormant like a pan of cold soup, had been turned up to a rapid boil.

When Antoine took me deeper in the woods, I was a little nervous; he was eighteen, he'd have kissed hundreds of girls not to mention having *done* it – of course he had, you could just tell. But I felt safe with him. We kept stopping to kiss some more, and he whispered that he couldn't believe I didn't have a boyfriend back home. I could have floated then, like dandelion fluff. I still couldn't believe

that a boy like Antoine wanted to be with me in this way, when I suspected all of Valérie's friends fancied him.

We reached a lake, deserted and glittering with a wooded island in the middle, and stripped off to our underwear and swam. Me, Lorrie Foster from Yorkshire with a body the colour of rice pudding, swimming in my bra and knickers with a boy! 'You're so beautiful,' Antoine said afterwards, gallantly offering his T-shirt for me to dry myself. He praised my skin ('like cream'), my eyes ('dark, mysterious') and even my mouth ('so pretty, like a flower'). If he even noticed my chubby thighs or wobbly bottom, he didn't seem to view them as faults – and soon, neither did I. It was as if I was seeing myself differently, like the way you adjust the settings on a TV. Finally, I was seeing myself in full brightness.

My cheeks glowed and my badly highlighted hair seemed to acquire a new sheen that had never been apparent under drab Yorkshire skies. Every cell in my body seemed to shimmer from all the kissing we were doing. Because, of course, following that afternoon at the lake, we spent every possible moment in each other's arms, swiftly graduating onto the kind of 'petting' the sign at the swimming baths warned you not to do. Oh, we petted all right, but there was no pressure to 'go all the way' (as it was quaintly known back home), even when we were alone in the apartment, because the unspoken message seemed to say: this is *perfect*.

Every night, as I drifted off to sleep on the pull-out bed in Valérie's room, I could still feel Antoine's kisses hovering on my lips. I was madly in love, changed forever. The 'View to a Kill' lyrics remained untranscribed.

My last day in France loomed like a darkening cloud. We could hardly bear to talk about it. 'You'll come back,'

Antoine kept saying, as if to reassure himself as much as me. ‘Or I could visit you. I need to find a job anyway – anything’ll do. I’ll save up and come to Yorkshire!’ Try as I might, I couldn’t picture him in our chintzy living room back home, being fussed over by Mum.

On the day I was leaving, we all squished into Jeanne’s tiny car and drove to the railway station, where she and Valérie hung back awkwardly as Antoine and I hugged goodbye. *I love you*, he mouthed as the train pulled away. On the plane, I was crying so much the lady in the next seat gave me her embroidered hankie and said I could keep it.

Back home, I’d expected Mum to notice a difference in me immediately – to comment on my new, more sophisticated appearance and demeanour. I was certain she’d say something about the understated make-up I’d started to wear. However, she seemed more eager to tell me about Sue down the road who’d been coughing up bile, and how we’d have to cut back for the rest of the summer due to the exorbitant cost of my trip (I didn’t notice any cutting back where Mum’s make-up purchases were concerned). Only when I told her about Antoine did she sit up and take notice. ‘He can come here for a holiday!’ she enthused, and I wondered if it might actually be possible.

We wrote to each other, declaring our love, and then from a couple of letters a week, his airmailed missives dwindled to perhaps one a fortnight, then monthly, followed by a gaping void, during which I felt hollow and tried to tell myself the postmen must be on strike. However, the rest of our mail – the endless bills and Freeman’s catalogues – seemed to be arriving without any problem. Maybe the French postmen were striking?

They weren’t, of course. Antoine’s life was simply

continuing without me; I had faded to him, like a news-agent's neglected window display. The occasional letter read more like an exercise in rudimentary English: *We played good at football on Saturday. Our apartment is painted outside. How is the weather in Yorkshire?*

Even at sixteen, I knew that asking about the weather suggested he was no longer obsessed with my creamy skin or mysterious eyes. Valérie had stopped writing too – my visit had been the death knoll to our ‘friendship’ – apart from to dash off a hasty note, informing me that Antoine was now ‘madly in love’ with Nicole, my make-up tutor. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I stared at her last flippant sentence (‘I just thought you should know!’). Well, of course he’d end up with her; she was stunning. Yet I’d believed him when he’d said he loved me, and convinced myself that he was oblivious to the charms of his sister’s friends. I could almost hear Valérie’s cruel laughter as I screwed up her letter and threw it into my bin.

As autumn slid into a cold, wet winter, another letter arrived from France. ‘Ooh, is it from that boy at long last?’ Mum cooed, as I charged upstairs to my room to read it in private.

Dear Lorrie,

I hope you are well.

Valérie learns karate but broke shoulder.

Quite busy next few weeks.

Antoine

And that was the last I ever heard from the beautiful boy from the Massif Central.