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Mon Deuxieme Pays

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Author Bio

Amy Butcher is a junior at Gettysburg College. She is double-majoring in Creative Writing and English and recently completed a semester abroad in Aix-en-Provence, France. In addition to serving as co-production editor for the Mercury, Amy is a Gettysburgian staff writer and a tutor at the Writing Center. She enjoys traveling, cooking and her Jack Russell terrier. Upon graduating, Amy plans to continue her education and pursue writing at the graduate school level. She aspires to be a Creative Writing professor and freelance writer when she grows up.

Mon Deuxième Pays

On my last day in France, I ate a slice of vegetable quiche with ‘des champignons’ and ‘un verre du vin rouge.’ It was, after all, my last day in Aix-en-Provence. These things are best done with a bang.

It was hard to believe that I was headed back to the United States and away from the beautiful ‘ville’ I had learned to call home for four incredible, insightful months. It seemed absurd that after sixteen weeks of missing my small, suburban home and the friends, family and familiarity that existed there, the day to return had finally come. Ironically, it was on this day that I realized I wasn’t ready to leave.

As I turned to leave I glanced over my shoulder and smiled, “Mais la France toujours sera mon deuxième pays.”

“I don’t want to go,” I grumbled, packing the eight pairs of ballet flats I had insisted on bringing with me to France. “I just don’t think I’m ready.”

“We don’t have much of a choice,” my roommate laughed, heaving her suitcase onto her bed and stretching it wide for packing. “Tomorrow we’re gone.”

At this, I sat down on the bed and glanced out my bedroom window and at the beautiful view of Aix-en-Provence. “But I don’t think I’ve done everything I wanted to,” I sighed. My eyes shifted outwards, past the glass window and onto the town and I smiled. When I had first moved in, I thought that living in the outskirts of the city would be tiresome, as I’d have to walk back and forth from town each day. Now I couldn’t imagine my home-stay in France to be any different, and at night I’d sit in my bed and watch the chapel lights flicker in the mistral, the famous French wind that swept down from the Alps and bustled across the city. My host mother called it “le monstre,” *the monster*, and when it was particularly strong, she’d rush from room to room, heaving the big, heavy wooden shutters closed and locking them in place. “C’est très fort, n’est-ce pas?” she’d ask. *It’s very strong, huh?*

“Ya still have one more day,” my roommate reminded me, tucking a strand of blond hair behind one ear. Her name was Charlie and she was stunning blonde and her face was covered in freckles and she spoke with a Southern twang. “If ya have things ya haven’t done yet, now’s the time to go out and do them.”

Which is how I came to be sitting at a small café on the main drag, the Cours Mirabeau, at 2pm on a Sunday, savoring each delicate bite of a flaky, egggy tart between sips of a dark Cabernet Sauvignon.

“Plus du vin, mademoiselle?” a short, balding waiter asked me. *More wine?* I nodded to him. Of course.

“S’il vous plaît,” I smiled.

The plan was to do everything I had wanted to do for quite some time, things I should have done when I first arrived in France on that scorchingly hot

September Saturday. At the time, I was so overwhelmed with my new life in a foreign country that I hadn't thought to do the very things that most people arrive simply to do. By the time I was accustomed to life in France, the little things didn't seem very important anymore; I was jetting off to sit in a bar constructed completely out of ice in Stockholm or ride a five-Euro gondola down the canals and under the Rialto bridge in Venice. Suddenly, stopping to sniff the market-fresh flowers and sip an espresso in a café didn't seem entirely important anymore. But the truth was that these were the very things that made France *France*.

After I had finished my lunch and requested 'l'addition' from my waiter, I stood and exited the small restaurant, stepping onto the main sidewalk that ran parallel to the Cours Mirabeau. *Now's the time*, I thought, and removed from my backpack a small list of things I had written down on a napkin over lunch.

The first thing I decided to do was visit the daily flower market, which was open every morning until noon and every weekend until five. I wandered in and out of rows of flowers, envying both vibrant purple lavender stalks and scorchingly yellow daisies. I touched each flower lightly, lifting it to my nose and breathing its beautiful scent in through my nostrils.

"Combien, ça?" I asked, clutching a beautiful sunflower in my fist and smiling at an elderly French man who sat, his body heaved over a cane, just in front of me.

"Ça? C'est trois Euros," he grinned, and I handed him the change quickly.

"Ce n'est pas cher," I laughed, tucking the flower under my arm. *It's not expensive*. It wasn't. Three Euros for a beautiful flower was an incredible deal, but I wasn't surprised. The vendors were not greedy people; instead, they were simply men and women who loved the land and were devoted to making their living off of it, but nothing more. Their prices were always reasonable and the quality of their goods was always superb. I was never disappointed with their products.

With the sunflower still clutched in my hand, I meandered up the winding, cobblestone street and into Emil BEC, my favorite bakery in all of Aix. Every day at about noon, my university friends and I would buy "une baguette pavot," or poppyseed baguette, a block of cheese and a green apple. We'd sit on the front stoop of the university, nibbling our lunches hungrily or, on days when class was cancelled or we had enough time, we'd take our lunches to a small park and split an inexpensive bottle of rose wine. Still, I had never sampled any of the bakery's fine desserts, for life as a student in Europe is hardly cheap and I rarely had enough money to cover the cost of lunch, much less a fancy dessert. Still, it was my last day in France, and I couldn't think of anything I'd rather spend my money on than *une tarte de fruit* or *un croissant*.

I glanced about the store window anxiously, eying each baked good and trying to decide whether a fresh raspberry tart would suit me better than an éclair. Finally, I made my decision and walked to the counter, pointing to a small tart that contained sliced kiwi, strawberries, blueberries and raspberries piled high above a soft pink meringue. The crust looked flaky and buttery, and I could imagine the crunch of the crust and the resulting soft feel of the fruit in my mouth.

"Une tarte de fruit," I said. Again, I handed over my money in exchange

for a famous French delicacy and smiled at the woman behind the counter. After she handed it to me, I rushed eagerly out of the bakery and stood, in front of the shop, my mouth crashing down around the dessert. The flavors exploded onto my tongue and I licked at my lips eagerly. It was incredible.

I proceeded to walk along the streets, both those that I had traveled along before and those I had never explored. I passed beautiful fountains, sprawling wine stores and butcher shops that wafted out the savory smell of rotisserie chicken and herbed potatoes. Continuing along, I eventually found myself in front of Saint Mary, a small elementary school where I had taught English to six-year-olds every Thursday morning for an hour. It was a Saturday and the school was closed, but I wandered along the perimeter of the building, looking in each window before finding the one where I had taught.

"Je vous manquerais," I sighed to myself, remembering the fun experiences I had shared with the students. *I will miss you.* I had taught them the alphabet, colors, the numbers one through ten and common conversational phrases, and in turn they had taught me the virtues of patience and understanding, as well as Bugs Bunny's famous French trademark.

"He says, 'ça va, Doc!'" they had laughed one afternoon when I had discovered they knew about Bug's Bunny. "He doesn't say 'What's up, Doc!'"

Despite the fears that I had had upon learning that I would be teaching them, the kids had been a surprising joy to be around. When my weekly hour was almost over and we had learned a sufficient amount, I would teach them American songs and games, such as "Heads Up, Seven-Up" and "Simon Says." They always loved Simon Says, and would mix French in when they didn't understand a phrase. "*Simon says...leve le main!*" they would cheer.

"Je vous manquerais," I repeated to the exterior of the classroom, tracing my hand along the glass. *I will miss you.*

With only an hour before my final dinner with my host mother and roommate, I quickly made my way to the Café Mirabeau, my favorite bar in all of Aix. I had become good friends with the French bar owner, Paulo, and my French professor was often there, as well, sipping a small glass of whiskey and grading papers. Her name was professor Margaux Hofstedt, and she had been both a mentor and a friend. We had become good friends over the last four months and often spent our Saturday nights together, cooking dinner in her kitchen while enjoying a bottle of wine and some French music. Margaux always had a new artist to introduce me to, and my strongest memory of France will always be Margaux's laughter as Henri Salvador's song, "Jardin, D'Hiver" played over the smell of pot roast baking in the oven.

As I walked into the bar, I saw Margaux at a corner table with her notebooks sprawled across a table. She sat, quietly, marking notes in the corners of the pages and bouncing her foot in soft circles under the table. At the front of the bar Paulo stood behind the counter, waving. With the jingling sound of the bell on the door, Margaux looked up and smiled at me, raising her arms for a hug.

"C'est mon dernier nuit en Aix," I explained. *It's my last night in Aix.*

"A celebration, then!" the bartender chanted in English from behind the bar. He poured three glasses of white wine and handed one each to Margaux and

me. "To a wonderful friend."

"Et deux très bon amis," I smiled. *To two good friends.*

"I will miss you," Margaux said in her broken English, doing her best to speak my language. We often spoke in both languages; she tried desperately to speak English while I did my best to speak French. It was a sign of respect for one another's language, and I appreciated it thoroughly.

"Vous me manquerez, aussi," I sighed. At this I felt a small tear well into the corner of my eyes, and I sipped my wine timidly. I would miss Margaux.

"Non, non, ma fille!" Margaux shouted. *No, no, my girl.* "Je tu verrai encore. Tu visiterai Aix-en-Provence encore." *I will see you again. You will visit France again.*

"Oui, Margaux," I said, wiping at my eyes and raising my glass. "Je peux visiter encore. Pour vous." *I will visit again for you.*

At this the three of us raised our glasses, and Paulo shouted in his thick accent, "Chin!" This was a sign of cheers.

"J'ai à partir maintenant," I sighed, looking at my watch. "J'ai à rentrer pour le dernier dîner en France." *I have to go now. I have to return for my last dinner.*

"Oui, bien sûr." *Of course.* Paulo and Margaux leaned over and squeezed one last hug. "Mais tu avez fait toutes les choses que tu veux faire en France. Vous avez habité comme une personne française. Maintenant vous devez retourner à votre pays." *You have done everything you wanted to do in France. You lived like a French person. Now you must return home.*

"Oui, Margaux," I smiled, pulling on my coat and reaching for the door heavily. As I turned to leave I glanced over my shoulder and smiled, "Mais la France toujours sera mon deuxième pays."

France will always be my second home.