

Jean Pierre

By Ewa Bronowicz

Everything sounded better in French. She was Nathalie in Paris, Natalia by birth. The children were *charmant*. The food *delicieux*. The house was in Montreuil, at the feet of Paris, which, surely, everyone would prefer over Katowice. When she first heard his name, Jean Pierre, it sounded more intriguing than Maciek.

“Jean Pierre is coming over again,” Alain announces.

He. Is Coming. Again.

Alain, the *papa*. Age: 44. Employment: public officer. Hobbies: swimming, reading history books, lamenting the state of French politics. He looks up from *Le Figaro*, his glasses rest on his nose.

“*Ah oui?*” Nathalie sounds surprised, hopefully.

Nathalie, the Polish *au pair*. She is looking after the Blancs’ daughters and looking for the French experience. It’s her first time abroad.

When her mother discovered that Nathalie could spend the summer in France as a nanny, she practically forced her daughter to apply. “It’s your chance to see a better world, a chance I never had,” she said. “And a chance to meet a French man with class and intellect, something you won’t find in Katowice.” The mother had given up on Polish men by then. The *au pair* requirements: be between eighteen and twenty-five years old and speak French. Salary: 50 euros per week, more than the average monthly salary in Poland. Bus ticket from Katowice to Paris: 380 *zlotych*, more than Nathalie’s mother could afford. For the first time since the divorce, Nathalie wrote a letter to her father. “Please help me make my dreams come true,” she pleaded. Three weeks later she received 190 *zlotych* in an envelope, all twenties and tens. There was a note too. “Have a great time, but watch out for the French men. They are known to take

advantage of young innocent women like you.” Nathalie showed the note to her mother, who laughed and sounded like a witch. She then tore the paper into four pieces and tossed it into the garbage.

Nathalie is setting the table for dinner when Alain tells them the news. The smell of mushrooms wafts through the house. In the dining room hangs an old map of France, from the 16th century. Across from it is a painting by Monet: a table in the garden, an unfinished piece of bread, a child playing on the grass, a house behind flowers and trees, two female figures strolling. Monet is one of Emmanuelle’s beloved painters. Claudette is drawing princesses, Anouk is writing on the dotted lines of a journal.

Emmanuelle, the *maman*, walks into the dining room. Age: 39. Employment: public officer. Hobbies: art, Jacques Brel, home decorating. She just changed from her work clothes, a pencil skirt, stilettos, into a white summer dress, bare feet. In one of their frequent *tete-a-tetes*, she told Nathalie she was dreading her fortieth birthday, something Nathalie couldn’t comprehend. Emmanuelle has a voluptuous body, large hips which don’t make her look big, large breasts, a string of curls on her head, all French-style. Nathalie’s mother is one year younger than Emmanuelle, but the kilos she gained after Nathalie’s father had left make her look like an old maid: greasy skin, puffed up cheeks, massive stomach and thighs covered with baggy skirts and shirts. Nathalie couldn’t understand how her mother could lecture her on the importance of finding a French husband when she herself ate and dressed like she was convinced that no man would ever want her again.

Emmanuelle asks if Jean Pierre is really coming again.

When he visited two weeks ago, Emmanuelle told Nathalie she wouldn't see him again, because he honored them with his presence twice a year, three times at most. "He thinks we're boring."

Claudette, age 6, hair blond and curly after her mother, says that she wants to be a princess.

Alain, still in his blue shirt and pink tie, sits at the dinner table. He calls the girls. Claudette is wearing a cream-white dress which makes her look angelic. Anouk, age 9, announces that she wrote a full page in her journal. "You're in it, Nathalie, because we had so much fun today in the park." Anouk, sitting next to Nathalie, divides the quiche on her plate into small pieces, and places one in her mouth. She eats like a French woman already.

Nathalie is an only child. She told Emmanuelle and Alain that the girls are like her sisters. Especially Anouk: a reader, a writer, an excellent student, mature beyond her age. In the Bois de Vincennes, they played one of their favorite games: pretending they were going on a trip, which always involved walking under a water fountain, which, in their game, meant getting caught in the rain. Anouk was the *maman*, Nathalie the *papa*, and Claudette the *bebe*.

Alain pinches Claudette's ear. "Were you a cranky *babe* or a happy *babe* today?"

Claudette bursts out laughing. She was the cranky *bebe*. Alain says that they should all switch roles next time. "In life, we have to play many different roles," he adds. "If only our politicians knew how to do that, this country would be in a much better shape." Alain rolls his eyes and glances upwards. The crystal chandelier sparkles.

Nathalie doesn't know anything about French politics. But the Blancs belong to the middle class, which means the country is a dream. They own an entire house, and rent another one for one full month in the summer. Their house, located in the suburbs of Paris, is beautiful,

stylish, a four-bedroom castle with a garden. They have a dining room with a large wooden table in the middle. A room solely for the purpose of eating that is not the kitchen: Nathalie is still impressed. Two bathrooms, one on each floor. In the kitchen, marble countertops that shine and are smooth to the touch. Thick, colorful carpets in each room; Emmanuelle says they are Persian. And the girls each have their own room, pink walls for Claudette, yellow for Anouk. Nathalie also has her own room in Katowice, with Kevin Costner and Bon Jovi posters covering the chipping paint, but her mother sleeps in the living room.

She and her mother live in a one-bedroom apartment on the sixth floor of a deteriorating block of flats which offers a view of another block of flats, which also looks like it's about to collapse. For Nathalie and her classmates, summer vacation means, for the most part, staying at home, walking or riding a bike to the river, to the wheat fields. Last year, when Nathalie and her boyfriend Maciek took a train to the mountains and went camping for one week, Nathalie thought it was the best summer of her life. That, of course, was before France.

Emmanuelle pats Alain on the shoulder. "Alain the *philosophe*. They're still kids, they have time to play before they grow up."

Nathalie asks when Jean Pierre is coming. When she hears herself say his name out loud, she feels a throbbing sensation all over her body.

This weekend.

Nathalie is trying to repress her smile.

"*C'est bizarre, n'est-ce pas?*" Emmanuelle passes the quiche to Alain, who is ready for a second serving. Emmanuelle taught Nathalie how to make it: dough, eggs, heavy cream, spinach, cheese, lots of cheese. Nathalie adores her host mother: her silky shirts, her French cooking, her concentrated look when she prepares reports for work. "Your life is perfect: your husband, your

daughters, your job, your city,” Nathalie said to her one day. Emmanuelle hugged her. “You are so young, Nathalie,” she whispered, as if it were a secret. Nathalie is their first au pair; the Blancs wanted to share the French culture and customs with people from other, less privileged countries, they wrote in their introductory letter for the au pair program.

Emmanuelle and Alain are drinking Bordeaux. When Jean Pierre was at the table two weeks before, he insisted that Nathalie join them. Nathalie protested—she didn’t want to drink in front of the Blancs, and they never offered. “But you’re not a child anymore,” Jean Pierre poured her a glass.

That night after dinner, he asked her questions: why did she come to France, where did she live in Poland, what did she study. Nathalie, in denim shorts and a tank top, answered the questions in the living room. Her good French suddenly seemed inadequate. Emmanuelle was putting the girls to bed, Alain excused himself to watch the 8 o’clock news. He turned the TV on, lowered the volume. The Louis XIV sofa was dark pink, slightly uncomfortable. On it, Nathalie felt she was blushing. She couldn’t even hear the news, only the voice of Jean Pierre. He poured more wine into her glass, then sat next to her. “To your French experience,” he toasted.

His hair was dark and thick, his eyes deep blue, his shirt purple, not all the way buttoned. Nathalie visualized a muscular chest underneath. He wore tight jeans, like a teenager. Her father or Maciek in tight jeans? They’d look ridiculous. On French men everything looked good.

“*Et vous?*” Nathalie asked, thinking of unbuttoning his shirt, all the way. She jerked her upper body when she realized the violence of her desire, the indecency.

He laughed and shook his head. “Please, no *vous*. I’m not that old.”

From Polish literature he knew Kosinski.

“My mother said I was too young to read him, but I did anyway.” Nathalie uncrossed her legs, crossed them again. She remembered the sex scenes, violent, obsessive, extreme, desires spilling out of the pages. Was he asking her about Kosinski because he wanted her?

“What about *Lolita*?”

Nathalie smiled, sipped the wine, smiled again.

It was one of her favorite books. She told him, goose bumps all over her body. Maciek had tried reading it, but he never finished. Alain said, “Don’t let my brother corrupt you,” his eyes on Jacques Chirac.

To literature and passion!” Jean Pierre toasted. Had she read Flaubert, de Maupassant, Camus? She didn’t, she had to admit, but assured him she would. Alain turned the television off, and reported that Chirac still hadn’t reached a compromise with the workers. “What’s the word on the strike in Lyon?” Alain sat down on a chair across from Nathalie and Jean Pierre. He informed Nathalie that his brother was a radio journalist.

“I am a journalist too!” Nathalie jumped up.

Alain didn’t know that.

“It was just a high school newspaper,” Nathalie added, her voice dropping to an embarrassed whisper. Alain assured her that being a high school newspaper editor was a big deal, then repeated his question about the strike.

If only Alain could be her father. In early July, after she’d first arrived, they spent four weeks in Brittany, on vacation. The Blancs rented a cottage near the beach in Tharon-la-Plague, a sleepy town on the Atlantic Ocean. Nathalie had never learnt to swim in Poland, but, thanks to Alain’s help, she joined Emmanuelle and the girls in the water within the first few days. She wanted Alain to be her father. She wanted to have been born in France, into *foie gras* and

Peuegot. Instead, she had been born into *kielbasa* and *Maluch*. *Foie gras*—sophisticated, a delicacy. *Kielbasa*—greasy, of peasant origin. *Peuegot*—sleek and modern. *Maluch*—unreliable, loud, shame to all cars. The Blancs eat foie gras and own a Peugeot. Nathalie's mother frequently serves kielbasa for *obiad*: cooked, fried, raw. Mostly fried. The *Maluch* they couldn't even afford. Maciek's parents have one, but they drive it only on special occasions, because gas is too expensive.

But if Alain was Nathalie's father, she couldn't be with Jean Pierre, his brother. That would be a sin. Then again, everything was a sin. When last year at confession Nathalie told *Ojciec* Starowiecki that she dreamed about locking her father in a prison cell, the priest called it a sin, and Nathalie stopped going to church.

On the Louis XIV, the night Nathalie met Jean Pierre, she felt his eyes travelled from her head to her toes, pausing between her stomach and thighs. She pushed her bare feet onto the Persian rug, wanted to fly away on it, like on a magic carpet, with this perfect man.

Back at the dinner table, Alain says that perhaps his brother has a new *petite amie* in Paris.

"That would explain why he's back so soon," Emmanuelle nods with a smile. She pushes her hair behind her ears, exposing the small silver earrings. Her white sleeveless dress reveals her tanned arms. Nathalie is sure that Alain would never leave his wife, would never be tempted to be with another woman. How could he?

Claudette says she has many *petite amies*. Anouk begs to be excused—she has a new *Madeleine* book from the library, and she wants to read at least the first three chapters before she heads over to Fifi's house for a sleepover. She points to her plate: she consumed most of her quiche and salad.

“He doesn’t have a girlfriend in Lyon?,” Nathalie wants to know. She takes a sip of water, and imagines that it’s wine, and that she’s drinking it, sucking it, from the lips of Jean Pierre.

“If he did, that wouldn’t stop him from having another one in Paris.”

Nathalie stares at Emmanuelle. She must have misunderstood her question. In French, *petit amie* can be a love interest or friend who happens to be a woman. Emmanuelle thinks Nathalie means the latter category. Of course, Jean Pierre is single. He is coming back for her.

Emmanuelle takes a small bite of lettuce. Nathalie wishes her own mother would eat lettuce instead of mashed potatoes. Emmanuelle wonders if Anouk spends too much time reading. Alain reaches for a second serving of the salad. He doesn’t think so.

“I read a lot too when I was her age,” Nathalie chips in. Her parents fighting in between the chapters of *War and Peace*, Natasha falling madly in love with Anatol at the opera.

“I have nothing against literature. But anything in excess can be dangerous,” Emmanuel persists.

Alain agrees.

Nathalie needs to figure out what she is going to wear for Jean Pierre.

Jean Pierre. Three syllables. She could have sex with his name. Up and down and up again. Jean Pierre. Jean Pierre. Jean Pierre.

Nathalie quickly reviews the loss of her virginity with Maciek. Her bed, after school, quick. She was fifteen then, and didn’t understand why Maciek had insisted that they do it, that it was such a big deal to do it. It wasn’t. But now she couldn’t stop thinking about Jean Pierre naked. It was like hunger for food, but more piercing, sharp.

He is supposed to arrive in the evening. Nathalie doesn't call off her Friday night plans. She doesn't want the Blancs to suspect anything. She gives the girls a bath, then puts on her favorite tight jeans, and a red tank top. She bought the jeans in Paris, size small. She stands in front of a mirror in her room. She wishes her breasts were bigger, like Emmanuelle's. She applies black mascara to her eyelashes, red lipstick to her lips. Nathalie is a brunette, after her mother. One day she'll go blond. She brushes her hair, decides that it looks shinier than in Katowice. It must be the French shampoo. Her hair reaches just below her shoulders, and she wonders if Jean Pierre likes it, will like it when he sees her. Nathalie asks Emmanuelle if she looks like a French woman. Emmanuelle is leaning on the kitchen counter, scribbling something in her weekly calendar. "All the French boys will want you." She smiles. "But don't forget about Maciek." Nathalie kisses her on the cheek. How can she think about Maciek when Jean Pierre is coming?

La Caravane is booming. Fashionable young people are crowding into the bar, leaning against the walls. Every light on the wall is a different color. Nathalie sees her friends squeezed in a corner table by the window. "Let's have a wild night," Sophie says, competing with the loud jazz. They'd met at the au pair orientation, and went out together on weekends since the Blancs returned from Brittany. Sophie is also eighteen. "All those French men waiting for us." She is sparkling from head to toe, short dress and make-up. She is Sophie in Paris, Sofia in Slovakia.

"We've been here for six weeks. We have three weeks left to go. This is the night," Regina adds. She's from Lithuania, and swears she'll move to Paris one day.

They all have boyfriends back at home and love them and miss them and agree that a little fun is not a sin. "Just a kiss," Sophie raises her glass of Chablis. They are in Paris, after all. The city of love. Nathalie's mother had instructed her to leave Maciek before her trip, to increase

her daughter's chances of meeting someone in Paris. But Nathalie couldn't proactively dump him; she loved him.

"Can we join you?" a young man asks, and points to his two friends. Laurent, Jean Francois, Olivier. Olivier, the one who introduces everyone, has big teeth and a cute smile. All three men all wearing blue jeans and light colored shirts; they look almost identical.

"What do you do?" Sophie asks, and nods when she hears the word "university." Sophie, Nathalie and Regina decided they were not going to waste their time with high school boys. College students were perfect.

Nathalie asks and answers a few questions. She is looking at her watch. Sophie pinches her hand when Olivier offers another round of drinks. Almost ten o'clock. Jean Pierre's time. The promise of Jean Pierre blinds her, she can't even see the people at the bar anymore. She says she has to go.

"You can't be serious. They are college students." Sophie takes her aside.

When Nathalie told her about Jean Pierre a few weeks before, that she liked him and thought he liked her, Sophie decided he was too old. "Besides, your host father's brother—that's disgusting."

"I have to go," Nathalie repeats. She feels like there is a remote control vibrating inside her, telling her what to do.

On the Metro, she watches Paris in quick time: the Eiffel Tower shining at the city, the towers of Notre Dame springing up to the sky. She remembers that she's supposed to e-mail Maciek today. "I miss you," he writes once a week. "I miss you," she writes back. Before the summer, they vowed to stay together, even though Maciek begins university in the fall. Nathalie's summer away was not going to be an obstacle either. Unless, of course, she met

someone *français*. On the Metro, there is a man with graying hair sitting next to a young woman. The man has his hand on her lap. Nathalie imagines Jean Pierre with a woman, a French woman, of course. What if she misread the signs? What if he was simply trying to be nice to his brother's au pair? No, that cannot be. When Alain excused himself to select another bottle of wine that night, Jean Pierre pressed his leg against Nathalie's, and whispered, "To be continued."

Nathalie watches the man and the young woman get off the train together. In their place sits a woman, with long fine hair like her mother. Nathalie imagines her mother in their old apartment, eating chunks of *sernik* and watching Rohmer's *L'Amour l'après-midi* over and over again. In the movie, the man has a brief affair with another woman, then he returns to his wife, and realizes that he loves her. In real life, the man doesn't return, her mother said to Nathalie after they watched the movie together a few months ago. It was one of her mother's favorite movies.

Nathalie told Emmanuelle everything: that her father had left them for a younger woman, that her mother has been depressed ever since. Nathalie was twelve when her father moved out. She told her friends that he'd died in a car accident. One day Basia, her best friend, offered condolences to Nathalie's mother. The mother calmly thanked Basia. After the girl left, she slapped Nathalie, shouting, "what a disgrace." Nathalie didn't know if she meant the divorce or the lie. Later that night, her mother made Nathalie promise: from now on, no more secrets, we tell each other everything. "We only have each other," her mother explained. Nathalie honored the promise without even having to try—her mother was her best friend. The only reason she hasn't written to her mother about Jean Pierre was that she didn't want to create any false hope. She'd wait until it was certain. Well, and she did worry about telling her mother his age. Her mother would be thrilled to hear her daughter had a secret date with a French man, but if the man

turned out to be twenty something years older than said daughter, she could make a scene.

Nathalie's mother detested men who fucked younger women. That she made clear to Nathalie via endless monologues on love and Nathalie's father's idiotic decision to jump ship.

Back on the Metro, the woman who could be Nathalie's mother smiles. Nathalie pictures her with a teenage daughter, a loving husband. The train stops at Robespierre. Nathalie pulls the handle up and the door opens. When she first arrived in Paris, she wrote a long letter to her mother about all the city's wonders, and devoted a whole page to the Metro. "My motion sickness is gone." In Katowice, the old, dying, puffing and huffing buses made Nathalie nauseous. The Paris Metro is clean, fast, modern. Now Nathalie slowly climbs the stairs towards the exit. The street is quiet. There are no drunks on the benches, a common site in Nathalie's neighborhood in Katowice. Here, every house looks *unique, charmant* in its own way. The French people are inside, too engaged in their own lives to spy on others. There, the block of flats faces another block of flats, a never-ending row of windows, old people watching young people from them. One day, Nathalie's mother would sit at one of those windows. Nathalie thinks: Jean Pierre. She passes a row of houses, smiles at her favorite Boulangerie, now closed. The houses look glued together, like lovers. She turns left on Rue Lamartine. When she first discovered that the Blancs were located in the suburbs of the city, she was disappointed. But within days of her arrival she fell in love with the residential streets, the Bois de Vincennes within walking distance. The Blancs' house shines from across the alley, the lime walls covered with abundant vines. If Jean Pierre came for her, she will be saved from her mother's fate. If he returned to Paris for another woman, Nathalie is an idiot.

She enters the house quietly; it's almost eleven. His voice: deep, strong, sensual. He came.

Nathalie's heart is beating fast. It doesn't matter why he's back in Paris. She rushes to the living room.

"*Voila*, Nathalie," Jean Pierre's strong voice travels through her body, from her ears down to her thighs.

Alain reminds him that the girls are sleeping.

Jean Pierre covers his mouth with his hand.

He came for her.

He raises from a chair, and gently kisses her on the cheek, three times. Nathalie has never loved the French custom of saying hello more. When he kisses her, he rubs a side of his cheek against hers. It's rough, manly. His tanned face, his big hands. He is wearing black jeans and a dark gray shirt. His sleeves are rolled up. When he looks at her, she feels hot, fiery.

"*Ca va?*" she asks. She stands in front of him, skinny jeans, sandals, red top, shifting from side to side. Alain asks if she had a good time with Sophie. Nathalie is a little tipsy from the bar, but seeing Jean Pierre makes her feel drunk.

She wishes them goodnight, stumbles up to her bedroom. She conquers the stairs, breathing heavily. She collapses on the bed, touches the red quilt. A few minutes later she hears Alain walk to the master bedroom, located across from the bathroom. To go or not to go. Her mother would tell her to go, unless she knew Jean Pierre's age. Emmanuelle, surely, would tell her not to go. Not to mention Maciek.

Nathalie tiptoes downstairs. The stairs squeak a little, but nothing can stop her. The hallway is dark; the crystal table lamp, Emmanuelle's recent purchase, lights up one corner of the living room.

“Come here.” Jean Pierre is sitting on the Louis XIV, waiting for her. She sits next to him, almost touching his legs. She shivers. He tells her he came back to see her again. “*Tu m’avais manquee.*” I missed you.

His boldness. His romanticism. His lips, his body.

Nathalie says she’s been thinking about him. She doesn’t want to say “obsess.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

Nathalie nods. In Poland. She points towards the window. Katowice, with its unsmiling buildings and people, belongs to a faraway planet.

“So you’re not a virgin. But you’ve only had one lover.”

How does he know?

He reaches for her hand, slowly. When he caresses her hand, she trembles. His skin is soft. She smells him, the wine, the strong scent of his aftershave, sweet and spicy. She runs her hand on the inside of his. He squeezes her hand. He pulls her towards him so that she lands on his lap. Nathalie’s breasts are pressing against her tank top, her underwear feels wet. They kiss violently, touch restlessly. The rest is fantasy.

“*Ca va, Nathalie?*” The next morning Emmanuelle is sitting on the Louis XIV, braiding Claudette’s hair.

Nathalie, in shorts and her “I love Paris” T-shirt, stares at them. She can’t believe they are sitting on the couch. That couch is her bed of love. Last night, when Jean Pierre asked her if it was her first orgasm, she rubbed her forehead against his neck, nodding. Maciek always looked extra happy when his body released the thick white liquid into her, but Nathalie hadn’t felt anything. The explosive pleasure that bombarded her last night, what was something. Jean Pierre on his knees, between her legs. Boom. Boom. Bang. Now the Louis XIV should be blocked off

like a crime scene. Or better yet, celebrated like a work of art. Nathalie imagines *pani* Starowiecka, her art teacher, lecture the class on the significance of the Louis XIV. On display in the Louvre, this contemporary work of art depicts a young woman and her orgasm. A Polish-French masterpiece.

“Is anything wrong, Nathalie?” Emmanuelle’s voice, concerned.

Nathalie smiles, and says that Claudette looks pretty. Everyone looks pretty. Everyone is smiling. Nathalie’s hair is like silk, her eyes like the ocean. That’s what Jean Pierre whispered into her ear last night.

“But my hair is not ready yet,” Claudette laughs. “*Maman* can do yours too.” Nathalie loves when Emmanuelle brushes her hair, braids them. But today she avoids looking at her.

Nathalie rushes to the kitchen, pours herself a cup of coffee. The coffee in Poland is always too bitter, with grinds on the bottom. Here, it’s a perfect mixture of bitter and sweet. *Delicieux*. Nathalie steps out to the foyer, picks up the phone and calls Sophie.

“I can’t come today,” she whispers into the receiver.

“What?”

She hangs up and adds, “Yes, I will see you then.” She made tentative plans with Sophie, but warned her that she may have to bail. Back in the kitchen, she explains that she is going window shopping with Sophie.

“You look different. Pale. But your cheeks are all flushed. Are you okay?” Alain, in his striped pajamas, the look of a caring father.

For the first time, she notices a resemblance between the two brothers. High chin, oval face, a similar shade of blue in their eyes. Alain is not unattractive, but he doesn’t have Jean Pierre’s charisma.

“I’m okay,” Nathalie says to Alain as she pours more coffee into her cup.

“*Bonjour*,” Jean Pierre appears in the kitchen. He, too, is smiling. And yawning.

“You must have had a good night,” Alain looks at his brother. With jealousy? Resentment? Nathalie can’t tell. “So good that you forgot your clothes upstairs?” Alain pats his brother on the shoulder. Jean Francois is wearing jeans and an undershirt. His arms are slightly muscular, tanned like his face.

“*Une nuit délicieux*.” A delicious night. “And we’re all family here, aren’t we?”

Nathalie takes a big sip of coffee and spills some on her chin. She wipes it off with her hand, and says hello. She wants him back on the Louis XIV, naked, inside her.

“Wanna join me and Thierry for lunch?” Alain asks his brother.

It’s Saturday. Another hot day, Nathalie guesses. She just cancelled off her plans with Sophie. Last night, after they made love, Jean Pierre asked her if she’d spend the day with him. What if he betrays her and agrees to join his brother?

“And talk about our bad politicians? No thanks.” Jean Pierre takes a sip of coffee, sits on a wooden stool. Nathalie watches him. He lied for her. She wants to kiss him, right there. Something is pulsating inside her, drawing her towards him.

“Will you come with us to the park today?” Claudette asks, strolling into the kitchen.

Nathalie doesn’t work on weekends but she often spends her free time with the Blancs anyway. “Sorry, I think I’ll be out all day.” Claudette makes a sad face. Nathalie admires her new flowery dress, and the girl seems to grant her forgiveness.

“She has a life, *cherie*,” Emmanuelle explains, and takes a small sip of water from a glass. “We’re picking up Anouk, then *Musee d’Orsay*, then a picnic with Solange and the girls.”

Nathalie admires Emmanuelle, her weekend museum visits with the kids, her red sleeveless dress reaching all the way to her ankles. “Join in later if you can.”

“*Merci*. I think Sophie wants me to have dinner at her place tonight.” Nathalie coughs as she says this. This is the first time she lies to Emmanuelle.

Jean Pierre is waiting for her at the Metro station. He kisses her on the lips. “Good morning, my Polish Lolita.” On the train, he holds her hand, and stares at her. Maciek looked at her, but not like that. Jean Pierre’s intensity, his eyes that speak desire. They get off at Chatelet, walk on Rue de Rivoli. He has his arm around her. In front of the elegant Hotel de Ville they kiss. Paris has never been more beautiful. In the Picasso Museum, Jean Pierre shows her Dora, Picasso’s lover and companion. She looks perfect at first, then disfigured. Jean Pierre explains that Picasso loved many women, differently. Nathalie studied Picasso in her art class, but she can’t remember anything. She wants Jean Pierre to teach her, everything. They buy paninis and white wine. Jean Pierre leads the way to his favorite park in Paris: the Square du Vert-Galant, in the *1er arrondissement*. The park is triangle-shaped, on an island in the middle of the city. They walk to the very edge, sit on the grass. The Seine is around them, the majestic Louvre on their right, the Eiffel Tower bursting into the clouds. Nathalie feeds Jean Pierre; her baguette with melted cheese and mushrooms, his mouth that knows her body after only one night. He feeds her: his baguette is ham and cheese. The Riesling makes her dizzy, she lies down and puts her head on his lap. She sees the sky, clear and blue. He lowers his head, his lips touch her forehead.

“*Je t’aime.*”

“*Je t’aime.*”

Later, they stroll in the Jardin des Plantes. There are people on benches, on the grass. The tropical greenhouses look enchanting, the flowers better than in Versailles, where the Blancs

recently took Nathalie for a day trip. Jean Pierre asks about Katowice. Nathalie imagines Jean Pierre in her home town. Good morning, *Ojciec* Starowiecki, meet my French boyfriend. If sex is a sin, I want to go to hell. Hello, principal Wierzbowski, let me introduce a journalist from Lyon. Please excuse my upcoming absences; I have to dedicate all my time to a French project. Everyone, of course, would be jealous. But Katowice is ugly, and Jean Pierre would hate it. In front of the fountain in Jardin des Plantes, Nathalie explains to him that there is no grass in Polish cities, only cracked roads and pavements. "Will you make love to me again tonight?" Jean Pierre asks and kisses her hand. She wants to say more about Katowice, her high school with graffiti on the walls that no one has bothered to wash off in years, the priest, *Ojciec* Starowiecki, who threatened to fail Nathalie in religion class because she stopped going to church, the fact that she, Nathalie, has one pair of summer sandals, and that one pair seemed enough until she arrived in Paris. But the tenderness that Jean Pierre's question stirs in her helps her forget about Poland. "I will say yes to everything you ask me," she announces, staring into his eyes. Then she is sitting across from him at a Japanese restaurant. Their table is by the window, a candle in front of them. Nathalie has never been out to dinner with Maciek. Everyone ate at home in Katowice. The only time she had a meal at a restaurant was for her grandfather's sixtieth birthday. That was before the divorce. Over sake, Jean Pierre wants to know about her family. Nathalie tells him about her mother. That she had Nathalie when she was eighteen. That she used to be pretty but that she's gotten fat and ugly after the divorce. That she's a high school French teacher but has never been to France, or any other French-speaking country. "Under Communism she could only travel within Eastern Europe. Now there is no money."

Jean Pierre nods. "Your mother was born on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain."

Nathalie translates the term into Polish out loud: *żelazna kurtyna*, the invisible line that divided Eastern and Western Europe. *Pani Stoicka*, her history teacher, said that the Americans and Western Europeans threw Poland into the lion's cage in 1945 and watched the lion devour it.

The sake reminds her of *Wisniowka*, cherry liquor she drank at house parties with Maciek. She feels warm inside her head, her body. About her father Nathalie says that she doesn't miss him. "I was always closer to my mother." But, she adds, because of him she also lost her grandparents: her father's parents, naturally, and also her mother's parents, because they couldn't accept the divorce. "They're Catholic," she explains.

Jean Pierre is not surprised Nathalie's mother lost her *joie de vivre*. "Her husband and her father abandoned her." Another reason not to get married and have children, he adds.

Nathalie guesses that Jean Pierre is around forty years old. In Katowice, a man is not supposed to be a bachelor beyond his early thirties. But Nathalie is thrilled that her *l'amour* is not a *divorcé*. She doesn't feel the age difference at all. The problem would be her mother. She would have to lie to her mother about Jean Pierre's age.

Jean Pierre orders food. Nathalie laughs, because she doesn't know anything on the menu. He leans over the table, places a kiss on her lips, then tells her of his childhood, growing up in Normandy, a stay at home *maman*, his *papa* teaching him how to play chess on Sundays, big family meals that seemed to go on for hours. His parents are still married, but there is no passion, hasn't been any ever since Jean Pierre can remember. He mentions a woman he almost proposed to. Luckily, he realized he didn't want to get married, before it was too late. He adds that monogamy is a utopian dream. It isn't natural. Nathalie nods. She understands "utopian," but why Jean Pierre would be against monogamy she cannot fathom. She must have misunderstood.

When he talks about his *voyages* to America, Thailand. Russia, she imagines they will travel there together one day.

Nathalie asks about Emmanuelle and Alain. Why he doesn't see them more often.

"They're good people, and they're family, but too *bourgeois* for me."

Before Nathalie's father left, Nathalie had a conventional family. She was happy then, her father carrying her on his back, her mother walking right next to them, smiling, the three of them chasing each other in their *osiedle*, in between *Maluchs* and bicycles. If that was boring for Jean Pierre, then he would surely show Nathalie something even better.

"You and I, we are unconventional," Jean Pierre confirms. He adds that their love is not a prison. They are together now, they want to be together now, and nothing else matters.

Nathalie listens to Jean Pierre, agrees with everything. Maybe her parents' marriage was a prison; the happy days transformed into misery, her mother yelling at her father, her father yelling at her mother. Nathalie and Jean Pierre are different, yes. When the waiter places a platter of colorful rice balls on the table, she knows that Jean Pierre is her soul mate. He calls the rice balls "sushi." She tastes them, raw salmon and eel, avocado and cucumber. *Magnifique*. There is no Japanese food in Poland.

Nathalie returns home first. It's almost midnight. She's hoping the Blancs are asleep. She walks upstairs quietly, drops off her bag, then leaves the room and closes the door behind her. The floor creaks, Nathalie freezes between Claudette's room and the bathroom. She feels like a thief. If Emmanuelle and Alain caught her with Jean Pierre, would they send her back to Katowice?

The living room is dark. When she walks in, he pushes her against the wall, pulls up her dress. She searches for his belt, his pants. She wants to scream, bite him, eat him. He kisses her,

then covers her mouth. For a moment, she imagines Emmanuelle and Alain coming down the stairs, turning on the light. Then, when Jean Pierre is inside her, nothing else matters.

“What did you do to me?” They are sitting cross-legged on the floor, whispering. He takes her head in between his hands, and asks her what she’s doing to him. He is going back to Lyon tomorrow but he has to see her again. He is honest, romantic, serious. He says exactly what she’s been waiting to hear.

“Yes.”

She has two weekends left, three weeks before going back to Katowice.

She invites him to her bedroom. Before morning, he’ll tiptoe to Claudette’s room, where he’s supposed to sleep. The risk they don’t mention. In her stuffy bedroom, Nathalie breathes heavily, her *l’amour* pleasuring her between her legs, her large backpack, with a return ticket to Katowice, underneath the bed.

When Emmanuelle walks into her room, Nathalie is naked, sitting on top of Jean Pierre. Emmanuelle laughs and points her finger at them. She watches them and laughs. Nathalie doesn’t want to stop her love-making. She glances at Emmanuelle, then looks back at her lover. But he is gone. Nathalie screams, wakes up. Was she dreaming? Jean Pierre is not in her bed. It’s light outside. She wants to lock herself up in her room for the entire day. What if Emmanuelle and Alain heard something last night? Or suspect? She can’t face them. But she has to see Jean Pierre.

He is in the kitchen, opening his mouth for a piece of omelette. His white undershirt, his unshaved face. Claudette on his lap. Like Nathalie in the dream.

Emmanuelle is making another omelette, Jacques Brel’s voice fills the room. Emmanuelle is singing with him, “*Ne me quitte pas.*” Don’t leave me. This is the song Nathalie’s

mother played on the day her father said he was moving out. She played it over and over again; he was stuffing plastic bags with underwear and pants. She was singing it too, yelling, crying, on her knees when he closed the door behind him. “Let me be for you the shadow of your shadow, the shadow of your hand, the shadow of your dog. *Ne me quitte pas.*” Nathalie’s father doesn’t speak French.

“Nathalie told me I make a better breakfast than her own mother,” Emmanuelle says to Jean Pierre with pride. She is now humming, “the shadow of your dog.” She is wearing a red bathrobe, her skin is glowing. Nathalie wonders about Emmanuelle’s sex life with Alain; she never sees them kissing or touching each other, but they seem happy together. Jean Pierre complements the food. Emmanuelle asks Nathalie if she met any nice boys last night.

Nathalie is relieved. If Emmanuelle still believes Nathalie is interested in “nice boys,” all is well.

Except that Jean Pierre will be gone today. What if she made a scene, like her mother? Jean Pierre, *ne me quitte pas*. Emmanuelle, I love him. Alain, I’m sorry. I have to go with him to Lyon.

No, she is not going to beg. She is not like her mother. And Jean Pierre, he would never leave her for another woman. He told her he loved her. More than once.

Nathalie stares at the eggs in the frying pan. Bright yellow. Are eggs always this bright? Emmanuelle adds mushrooms and onions. Cheese. Claudette is showing her drawings to Jean Pierre. He says he likes them, glances at Nathalie.

“*Et toi?*” Emmanuelle looks at Jean Pierre? “Did you spend the day with a new *petite amie?*”

Jacques Brel finally moves on to a different song. Jean Pierre tickles Claudette. He says that he met someone, and that he invited her to Lyon. Emmanuelle places an omelette in front of Nathalie.

“Doesn’t that get boring?” Nathalie doesn’t know what Emmanuelle means. Making breakfast?

Jean Pierre shakes his head. “*J’adore ma vie*,” he says, and glances at Nathalie. He must be secretly telling her he loves her. She stretches her arms, for a moment her “I love Paris” T-shirt reveals her stomach. Last night, Jean Pierre told her she had a sexy stomach.

“*D’accord*,” Emmanuelle doesn’t sound convinced. She waves her hand up in the air, adds that she heard noises last night, but was too tired to get up. “Did you get in late?” She butters a long piece of a baguette, and hands it to Nathalie. It’s still warm, crunchy, but who is she asking?

Nathalie quickly stuffs the baguette into her mouth.

“Not that late,” Jean Pierre responds. “Before I don’t see you for another six months, I want to take the girls out to the park.” He is moving Claudette up and down on his lap, like a horse. Claudette is laughing. “*Oui!*”

“Can Nathalie come too?” Anouk strolls into the kitchen. In her pale blue summer dress and a braid she looks elegant.

Nathalie agrees, then worries if she sounds too enthusiastic. Anouk expresses her enthusiasm by rising up her arms in victory. “And it’s the first time uncle Jean Pierre is coming with us,” she says proudly.

Emmanuelle gives a quirky smile to Nathalie. Nathalie opens her mouth wide. Emmanuelle must understand that she, too, is baffled by Jean Pierre’s unusual behavior, his offer

to spend time with the kids. She asks Nathalie if she's sure she doesn't mind going with them. Nathalie gobbles down the rest of her breakfast, runs up to get dressed.

The four of them: Jean Pierre, Nathalie, Anouk, Claudette. Could they be a family? Will people think they are? Jean Pierre, in a light gray short-sleeve shirt, holds Claudette's hand. Nathalie and Anouk walk in front of them. Nathalie glances back at Jean Pierre every few steps. He returns her smile every time.

The Bois de Vincennes opens up to them like a new world. Children on bicycles, children in strollers. Parents on benches, reading, chatting. The sun is strong, the air humid. There are rows of flowers descending evenly from the statue of a man on a horse. Napoleon, Nathalie points to it. She remembers him from high school history books. "Before 1812, everyone in Poland loved Napoleon. We thought he was our savior, that he'd rescue us from Russia. But he betrayed us." That's what *pani* Stoicka always says.

Jean Pierre's voice, the sweetness, the sex. "Another French man can make it up to you."

Claudette asks if they can play their game. Anouk wants to know who will make what up to whom. Jean Pierre says he's talking about grown-up stuff. Claudette runs to their favorite water fountain. They are everywhere in Paris, those sprinklers. Each one is like a soft shower. On a hot day, both children and adults walk under it and around it, to cool off. Of course, such fountains don't exist in Poland.

"You be the *papa*, Nathalie and Claudette, you can be the *babes*. I'm the *maman*," Anouk says, blinking. Nathalie asks if they can switch—she wants to be the *maman* for once. Anouk doesn't want her to. Jean Pierre says that he will take good care of his *bebes*. Anouk is planning the trip—they will go to Marseille, right away. They all hold hands, Anouk, Jean Pierre, Nathalie, Claudette. Jean Pierre squeezes Nathalie's hand. Anouk says she hopes it's not going to

rain. She lets go of Jean Pierre's hand, and walks under the sprinkler. Claudette runs after her. Nathalie and Jean Pierre get wet together. They cross the fountain, still holding hands. Nathalie watches the water drop on his shirt, on his face. Water is dripping from her legs, her feet are soaked. Claudette screams that it's raining heavily. "We should have brought an umbrella, honey," Anouk says to Jean Pierre. He agrees with her. Claudette runs under the fountain again. Anouk follows her. Jean Pierre is watching Nathalie. She walks around the fountain, slowly dipping her legs and feet in the water. She runs her fingers down her legs, bends down to touch her feet. Jean Pierre closes his eyes for a moment, puts his hands in his pocket. Claudette is laughing. Nathalie daydreams about a shower with Jean Pierre. She sprays some water on him. He does the same. The girls join in. By the end of their water fight, they're all wet. "Too bad it rained on our vacation in Marseilles," Anouk concludes. Her elegant look is gone; she is now a carefree child, hair peeking out of her braid.

"Best trip in my life." Nathalie feels Jean Pierre's eyes on her. Wouldn't he tell her he wants to be with her forever if the girls weren't there?

Then he leaves.

When Nathalie takes the girls to the park again, later that week, she has to hear his name. "What did your uncle get you for Christmas?" she asks Claudette, out of the blue. *Histoire de Babar*. About an elephant. Claudette says that her uncle must like elephants. Nathalie read the book in her French class. She has tears in her eyes.

"Don't be sad, we'll miss you too," Anouk assures her.

She has to go home in two weeks. She promised the Blancs that she'd be back next summer, as their au pair. Now she doesn't care about next summer. She has to find a way to see her *l'amour*. She sends the promised postcards to her mother, Maciek, and Basia. She decides

not to send one to her father. On the card to Jean Pierre she writes shamelessly, “I want you.” He can’t call her at home. If Alain looked at the incoming calls, a number from Lyon would be suspicious. She calls him from a pay phone, one euro for an hour of his voice. To hear him say, “You are my Polish goddess.”

She e-mails him from the Blancs’ computer. The Internet is a novelty and a luxury item in Poland, but in France it seems like everyone has one at home. “What if Alain can read my e-mails, decode our love messages?” she writes to Jean Pierre.

He responds: “You are paranoid. I am crazy about you. Make me the happiest man in Europe and stay with me for a few weeks before going back to Poland.”

“How is Maciek?” Emmanuelle or Alain ask after she turns off the computer.

Maciek, square-jawed, blond, in nylon shorts that reach just below his knees. They’ve been like best friends for the past three years, but Maciek is still a boy, Nathalie now knows. He bikes to the internet café, the only one in Katowice. He will study electrical engineering, he will build a computer one day, for Nathalie. Nathalie tells Emmanuelle or Alain that Maciek can’t wait to see her.

Up in her room, Nathalie rereads Jean Pierre’s words in her head. Stay with me for a few weeks before going back to Poland. His city, his apartment, his bed. In France. It’s August 19th. In eight days Nathalie will board the bus, Paris to Katowice. Her compatriots, with their home-made sandwiches which they’ll gobble up without saying “*bon appetite*.” In nine days, she’ll be in Katowice, hugging her mother, who probably gained more kilos over the summer, and hugging Maciek, who will talk about all the engineering classes he registered for at the university. After Paris, Katowice will look dirtier than before. The city bus Nathalie and her mother will take to their apartment will make Nathalie feel sick again. She may even vomit. In

ten days, she will return to school. In religion class, *Ojciec* Starowiecki, with his long crooked nose, will scold her for not having gone to church all summer. In Latin, *pani* Hojna will scream at the class unless every single student can conjugate *perdere*. In history, *pani* Stoicka will talk about more countries that destroyed Poland. *Pani* Koziol, the French teacher, will at least praise Nathalie's excellent French. But Nathalie will still have to stay up all night to memorize the names of human bones, in Polish and in Latin. Another night to memorize all the rivers in Europe. At home, Nathalie's mother will complain about having no money and no husband. She will ask Nathalie, over and over, to talk about her French summer. She will cook *kielbasa*. On weekends, Nathalie will have the usual five-minute sex with Maciek, no fireworks and no "*mon amour*." They won't talk about it because no one talks about sex in Katowice. Nathalie will also go over to Basia's place to study math and to listen to Basia's father explain to them the difference between complementary and supplementary angles. On her way back home, Nathalie will see the drunks on benches, the old women in head scarves watching her like hawks from their windows. No more Nathalie; everyone will call her Natalia. Her only joy will be to write to Jean Pierre, write to Emmanuelle, Alain, and the girls. To watch French movies with her mother. And to read the French writers Jean Pierre recommended. She'll start with *Madame Bovary*.

Nathalie is sitting on her bed. She can't go back. Not yet. A man invited her to Lyon. Her man. For a few weeks. Why would she return to Poland? She will give Jean Pierre, and herself, three weeks. Extend her happiness for twenty one days. She can miss three weeks of school. Even in her senior year. Her mother will arrange for that. Nathalie just needs to convince her. Then she'll change her bus ticket. And she'll have to hide her new destination, Paris to Lyon, from Emmanuelle and Alain. If they insist on saying goodbye to her at the bus station, she'll need an excuse for that, too.

Three weeks of love. And what if Jean Pierre asks her to stay longer? Nathalie runs back to the computer, writes: "I am yours for three weeks." Emmanuelle calls her for dessert, and guesses that Nathalie misses Maciek. Nathalie says she does, she misses him very much.

"By the way, has Jean Pierre ever been married?" she asks. Emmanuelle, Alain, and Nathalie are sitting at the table, having dessert, *mousse au chocolat*, Nathalie's favorite. Emmanuelle got it especially for her, to "cheer her up." Claudette is in bed, Anouk is hosting her friend, Fifi, for a sleepover.

Emmanuelle laughs at the question. "No. Why do you ask?"

"I thought it'd be nice for the girls to have cousins." Nathalie wants to hear more about the woman he mentioned at the Japanese restaurant. She will ask Jean Pierre. Her jealousy might please him.

Alain licks the *chocolat* off his fork. "He hasn't found the right woman, that's all."

Emmanuelle shakes her head. She takes a sip of wine, cuts another *petit* slice of the mousse for herself. "He never will—he doesn't want one woman."

Alain puts the plate away. He explains that his brother says he doesn't believe in marriage, but it's not impossible that one day he'll fall in love, *vraiment* fall in love, and then he'll change his mind. "It's funny, but if you were twenty five years older, you'd be just his type," he adds, looking at Nathalie. "You two have a lot in common."

Nathalie stares at her mousse. She wishes she could hug Alain, but she also panics. She has to guard the secret. She promised Jean Pierre she would. When she called him two days ago, she said that perhaps she should confess the truth to Emmanuelle and Alain. She didn't want to lie to them anymore. Jean Pierre was certain they wouldn't understand.

Emmanuelle doesn't understand how Alain could say something so inappropriate. She purses her lips. "Is Anouk also his type? Nathalie is like our daughter."

Alain shakes his head and explains that both Nathalie and his brother are interested in journalism, literature, and travelling abroad. "You know he likes foreign women, too." But he's speaking hypothetically. Obviously.

Emmanuelle would rather he didn't. She, Nathalie, is still a child.

Alain knows that.

Nathalie smiles and says the mousse is *delicieux*. She imagines her wedding with Jean Pierre. A white dress, a veil, a French garden. Jean Pierre in a tuxedo. Her name would be Nathalie Blanc. Much better than Natalia Czarniecka. Will Emmanuelle and Alain come to the wedding? Will they bring the girls? They'll have to accept the truth then. Nathalie asks how old Jean Pierre is.

"Forty-six."

She swallows the chocolate. Twenty-eight years between them. Of course, age doesn't matter. Besides, in literature older men desired, and often married, younger women. Anna Karenina, Agata. And the age difference between Humbert Humbert and Lolita was definitely similar. But her mother would never approve. Jean Pierre is actually older than the mother.

Nathalie excuses herself from the table. She lingers on the stairs when she hears Emmanuelle's voice. "He could be her father. A father she doesn't even have. You shouldn't say things like that. Not in front of her." Alain apologizes, admits that he made a mistake. Nathalie throws herself on her bed. Jean Pierre is right: Emmanuelle and Alain are too conventional to understand true love.

“I will make love to you every single day,” Jean Pierre writes. “I am waiting for you already, touching myself.”

He is waiting for her. Every woman’s dream: to have a man she loves wait for her. Nathalie’s mother and Anna Karenina would agree.

Nathalie feels sorry for her mother. She is alone. Once or twice a week her mother sees her girlfriends, one who is married and another one who never was. From those meetings she reemerges looking younger, happier, healthier, as if speaking with other women was a lifeline. Of course, Nathalie and her mother also have fun together, watching bizarre French comedies or playing monopoly. In Katowice, Nathalie divides her time between her mother, Maciek, schoolwork, and literature.

Nathalie has to call her mother. The next day she walks over to the international café on Rue Saint Georges. “I need to stay longer,” she says quickly. She explains: *l’amour*. They keep their conversations short to minimize the cost.

“Natalia, is he French?”

“Yes.”

Her mother approves, so quickly that Nathalie doesn’t even have to make an effort to convince her. Then she adds, “I got pregnant when I was eighteen. Your age. If you get pregnant, marry him; marry him...”

Nathalie interrupts her mother. It’s too early to talk about marriage. Jean Pierre is Alain’s brother, she reveals. And he’s a journalist. “Besides, he doesn’t want to have children.”

“Do they know?”

“Of course,” Nathalie lies. For the first time, she lies to her mother. She immediately regrets it, but she also wants to impress her mother, convey that Jean Pierre can be trusted. And

there is no risk: the Blancs and her mother never communicate, they belong to two different worlds.

“How old is he?”

Nathalie takes a deep inhale. If she tells the truth, there will be no Lyon and Jean Pierre kissing her feet and no “*Je t’aime*” and the new life. “He’s like twenty years younger than Alain,” she says. “They are stepbrothers, actually.” That would mean Jean Pierre is around twenty-four.

Nathalie’s mother sounds relieved and excited now. She is on board, but wonders what to say at school.

Nathalie has a plan. “You will tell the principal that I have an opportunity to stay in France for three extra weeks to perfect my French. An educational opportunity. Tell him I’ll win the French contest after I return.” She adds that her mother should also contact *pani* Koziol, the French teacher. Nathalie was one of *pani* Koziol’s favorites. She’ll support the plan.

“Did you break up with Maciek?” her mother asks. “He called a few days ago, asking...”

“Yes, it’s over between us,” Nathalie confirms quickly. Why is she lying again? It is over between them, but Nathalie has yet to tell Maciek the news.

“Congratulations.”

Nathalie has to go. “You know how expensive the calls are.” She adds she’ll be in touch in a few days.

Emmanuelle says that Nathalie’s mother will be ecstatic to have her back at home soon. Nathalie says yes, exactly ecstatic.

That last week, Nathalie confides in Sophie. They meet at the Café Charbon, on Rue Oberkampf, for coffee. They are sitting outside, facing the narrow street. Sophie looks almost

Parisian in her chic black and white scarf. Nathalie says she loves Alain's brother, then takes a sip of her espresso. It's bitter and sweet, almost syrupy, a flavor she will associate with France. Coffee in Katowice will never taste this good.

"But you don't know him. You can't just take a train and spend three weeks with a man you've barely seen. He could be a murderer."

Jaroslav is Sophie's first serious boyfriend, the way Maciek was Nathalie's. "Let the people who never find true love keep saying that there's no such thing. Their faith will make it easier for them to live and die," Nathalie remembers the last lines of a poem by Wislawa Szymborska. A few months earlier, Nathalie's Polish teacher asked the class to choose one Szymborska poem to memorize. Nathalie recited "True Love," and received a 6, the best grade possible, but it was only now that she understood it. She asks Sophie if she ever had an orgasm. Sophie stares at her, looks around as if to make sure no one heard them. She whispers that women only have orgasms in Western books and movies. Nathalie laughs, then remembers that she would have given the same answer a month earlier. She looks at her watch, says it's time to go. Sophie begs her to return to Poland, to school, to Maciek. She says their summer in France has been *fantastique*, but that they have to go back to the real world.

"Your real world is better than mine," Nathalie says quietly. Sophie has a mother, a father, two sets of grandparents, and three brothers.

Sophie shakes her head. She says that their lives will be over if they don't pass their university entrance exams next summer. "Your dream is to study literature. Don't throw it away for a little romance." Sophie finishes her coffee, pushes the cup away. In her white mini skirt and make-up she looks older than eighteen, but still a teenager.

“This is literature in real world.” Nathalie grabs her bag, wishes Sophie good luck, and walks away.

She hopes that one day Sophie will experience true love.

The school, at least, approves. “*Pan* Wierzbowski said he will make an exception, because such excellent educational opportunities are rare,” Nathalie’s mother reports over the phone. The principal has high hopes for her in the annual French contest. He believes Nathalie will reach the national level. Her victory will be the school’s victory.

Nathalie fooled everyone. And she might actually win the French contest. If she goes back, that is. Her French is peaking. She thanks her mother, adds that she misses her. She can’t wait to tell her everything about France. But first, Lyon.

“I also told Maciek that you met someone else. A French man,” her mother quickly adds, with pride in her voice.

The call is disconnected before Nathalie raises her voice. She is saving money for the train ticket. Poor Maciek. She shouldn’t have told her mother that she’d left him. But her mother, why does she have to get involved?

Nathalie sees an e-mail from Maciek, titled “Why?” She’ll read it later, respond later. How can she think about pain when explosive pleasure is waiting for her in Lyon? Besides, Maciek’s name doesn’t even exist in French.

“You can do whatever you want with me for twenty-one days” she writes to Jean Pierre, then opens a new website when Alain walks into the room, looking for a history book.

“I will kidnap you from the train station, lock you in my apartment,” she reads when Alain is out of sight. True love, the fire, the goose bumps.

To her “I know we will be together forever,” Jean Pierre says that the future doesn’t matter. He reminds her that they don’t want to turn into conventional people who marry, have children, and who then stay together because they’re married and have children.

Nathalie doesn’t want to be like those people. But Emmanuelle and Alain are not like those people either, and yet, they are married, have been for twelve years.

Anouk comes to Nathalie’s room when she’s packing. She asks what is wrong: Nathalie has changed, she doesn’t listen to people anymore. Nathalie explains. Sometimes we have to do strange things in life, things that make no sense. “But in your heart you know that it’s the only thing you can do.” Anouk nods her head, says she understands. She gives her a card. “I’m sorry I never let you be the *maman* when we played in the park. When you come back next summer, you’ll be the *maman*, and if uncle Jean Pierre returns, he can be the *papa*. I know you’d like that.”

Nathalie embraces Anouk. If Anouk were a few years older, she would confide in her.

The next day Emmanuelle, Alain, and the girls stand in front of their *petite maison*. Nathalie managed to persuade them not to take her to the bus station. It’d be too difficult. Claudette now hands her a drawing of three princesses. Emmanuelle and Alain give her a silver necklace. The pendant says “Paris” on it. Alain announces that they’ll buy her a plane ticket next year. “Taking the bus is madness,” he shakes his head. “Over twenty hours. Unbelievable.”

Nathalie bursts into tears.

In four hours she will be in the arms of Jean Pierre, in two hundred and forty minutes she will reach ecstasy. Now she is saying goodbye to the people who changed her life, even if this final change, the biggest one of all, they didn’t intend and are unaware of.

“You’re a part of our family now, and you always will be, no matter what,”

Emmanuelle’s voice reaches Nathalie from far away.

No matter what.

No matter what?

Nathalie hugs Anouk, Claudette, Emmanuelle, then Alain. She lifts her backpack, pulls the straps on her shoulders. She’s wearing her denim shorts, sandals, a tank top. A see-through G-string. “*Au revoir.*” Anouk, in tears, promises to write a letter. Emmanuelle promises they will see Nathalie again next summer. And they’ll keep in touch throughout the year. She adds that she’ll call Nathalie tomorrow, to make sure she got home safely. Nathalie takes a deep breath. In her perfect plan she didn’t predict that Emmanuelle was going to call her house. Nathalie can still get in touch with her mother from Lyon, but she’d have to tell her mother she’d lied to her. That she broke their promise. And Lyon is her time with Jean Pierre, nothing else should matter. She doesn’t want to spoil her *l’amour* by having a fight with her mother. Maybe it’s best to hope that her mother will cover up for her? Won’t she? Anyway, Nathalie will deal with all this when she returns to Katowice. If she returns.

She starts walking towards the Metro. She turns back a few times, and waves. The Blancs are standing together, a conventional family. Nathalie will try to remember them just as they are now: the girls in their colorful summer dresses, Emmanuelle in yellow capris, Alain patting Anouk’s back. Nathalie will try to remember them just like that, because she may never see them again. When Emmanuelle dials Nathalie’s home number in Katowice tomorrow, she’ll likely find out the truth. Nathalie’s mother will be taken by surprise and won’t have enough time to come up with a lie. And Jean Pierre, should she tell him? As long as Emmanuelle and Alain don’t show up in Lyon to make a scene, they are untouchable together. Besides, if Alain and

Emmanuelle are too bourgeois for Jean Pierre, then this is his chance to show them how unconventional he is. At *Gare de Lyon*, Nathalie locates her TGV train. Jean Pierre told her it's the fastest one in Europe. It looks like a bullet. Smooth and sharp. Nathalie boards the train. For a moment, she is amazed how quickly life can change. You love your mother, your boyfriend, your new family, and then suddenly you give them up, for *l'amour*. She, too, will show Jean Pierre just how unconventional she can be. She will propose to him. Surely he'll change his mind about marriage then. He must. He is Nathalie's ticket to a better life. He is the love of her life.

Nathalie is sitting by the window. The train begins to move. Is it travelling backwards? She feels dizzy. The train pulls out of the station, speeds up into the open landscape of the city. The Eiffel Tower seems to be walking away from Nathalie, faster and faster. Nathalie jumps up. Of course, she is sitting in the backwards-facing seat. She looks around. All the front-facing window seats are occupied, and the Eiffel Tower is gone.