

One father. One daughter. And the wine trip to end all wine trips.



corked

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Map of France

Part One



alsace



Chapter One

When it comes to champagne and our family, my father has only one absolute rule: we do not drink it when we are sad.

In the pebbled courtyard of this audaciously French bed and breakfast, my father and I stretch our limbs. His arms flap out, parallel to the expanse of pigeon-grey pebbles, his palms wide and splayed, as though he's holding the most gigantic pair of hedge-clippers and is just about to cut a bush into a topiary of a cock. The rooster kind. He flings his arms as wide as they'll go, pulsing them over and over. As he flings, he spits out a sequence of vowels found in Dutch words, "OO!", "EE!", "AA!" ... "OO!, "EE!", AAAAA!"

I drop my head to my knees and hang there, feeling the xylophone-click of my vertebrae, smelling the wind that bursts around us. It's fresh and animated, loaded with invisible particles that blow off the clusters of fruit from the vineyards surrounding the B&B. The vineyards go on and on, interminable grids of interminable rows of interminable vines. The stone house looks besieged by the vines, as if it could, at any moment, be overtaken by these squat spiky plants, should they decide to uproot themselves, devise a plan, walk the short distance, and begin a good old rampage of vine-thrashing destruction.

Pressing out the last bit of air from the bottom of my lungs, I pop up and jog over to my father, punching the air with each step. When I arrive at his puffed chest, I reach out my hand, which I've formed into a claw, and pantomime tearing out his heart. I hold the heart in one hand, turn around, and drop-kick it into the nearest field, which is now turning all iris and gold as the big country sky shuts down for the day.

"Thank you, Tou Tou. I didn't need that old thing anyway," he says. Tou Tou is my French nickname. It is slang for "baby dog".

"Suze-la-Rousse," I say the name of the town we're in like a proclamation.

"*Suce la rousse*," my father mispronounces on purpose.

"Suck the redhead," I translate.

"Yesssss! I've done this many times." Maybe he is making a joke.

"Gross. Suck the redhead. Gross." But I laugh, because we've just come from a terrific wine tasting in the glorious Rhone Valley, in the vineyards of

Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The owner's wines tasted of delicious cake, and in his relaxed Southern French manner, he'd opened more than a dozen bottles for us to sample. I couldn't bear to spit any of them out, so I swallowed and swallowed each sip of delicious cakey wine. Now, with all this new gulped air and the remains of the booze, I have become a little drunk again. My father shouldn't have allowed me to drive. I shouldn't have allowed me to drive.

When we rap on the glass door of the stone house, a small pitbullish woman greets us. She is in her early 30s, and has a wide-eyed, moon-faced baby perched on her hip. She allows us to take two steps into the front room, then blocks our passage. Immediately, she sniffs out my accent.

"Americans?" she asks, in English. Her accent is convincing. This is a shock to vaguely-drunken me, considering her house is in a tiny village and she's surrounded by more plants than people.

"Canadian actually," I respond, in English, "But my father, here, is French. French from France. This France, here." I point twice at the ground, to show her what France I am talking about. "Paris." I point up, where Paris lives.

"Oh." She seems disappointed. "I used to work in America. I was a catering manager for a hotel in Washington D.C." She says this fast; she seems ravenous for conversation.

"That's what my father does. He's a hotelier." My father momentarily takes his attention away from wagging his index finger in front of the baby's face and nods to corroborate my statement. He immediately goes back to the baby, letting his finger slice through the air slowly. Left and right, left and right. He looks like a cop administering a sobriety test to a tiny impaired driver.

“I admire the American work ethic. I want to go back there. Do you know the French unions are petitioning for even *shorter* weeks? 31.5 hours. It’s lazy. I can’t stand it. But my husband is based here. That’s why we opened the B&B. I want to leave this shit-hole,” she sputters.

I do a slow 180-turn to gaze out her door. Magic hour is in full, foolhardy effect, frosting the gnarly vines with platinum. Bars of golden light poke through the surrounding tree branches, most still covered with leaves the color of cartoon fire. Startled by something we do not see, a beige cluster of birds explodes skywards. I turn back and examine the interior of her home: the thick, grey-brown high-beams, the exposed stone walls, the smooth octagon terra-cotta tiles, the wide bay windows, bracketed by fresh linen curtains, sheer and bright.

“I see what you mean,” I respond. I reach out my hand for the keys and tap my fingers gently to my thumb. She rests them in my palm and tells us where our rooms are.

We thank her, exit, and walk along the grass path that leads to a row of individual coach-houses. We dump our bags in our neighboring rooms and cross-inspect each others’ living arrangements. We both have stone terraces and delicate wrought-iron tables outside. Inside, four-poster beds and mosquito nets, large bathrooms with clean porcelain and clawed tubs.

“Dad, she’s right, this place is a real shit-hole.”

“Toots, let’s go out and celebrate *zees* shit-hole town and our shit-hole trip,” he says. “We’ll have some nice dinner, some nice champagne.”

After I splash a quart of freezing water on my face and resurrect, 50 times, the

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lost art of the jumping jack – for sobriety’s sake – we climb back into our rented Citroen Picasso and trek south to a restaurant in Châteauneuf. My dad has a nebulous memory of an unforgettable meal he’d had there once, several years ago, on another wine trip with my mother, Kathryn Borel Sr. Her nickname is Blondie, because of her hair. That was also the name of Hitler’s dog, though my father claims these things are unrelated.

“*Eet* was truly memorable,” he says, as we pass the white sign that confirms we are in the correct town.

“Which way?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Should I go in the direction of the *centre-ville*?”

“Why not.” He is distracted by something again. Earlier in the day, he’d had a bizarre moment in the car, before we were about to meet the vineyard owner at Châteauneuf-du-Pape. He’d sat there, sullen and impenetrable, inhaling through his front teeth like he was about to say something. When I reached out to touch him near the little rogue hairs next to his left eyebrow, he swatted my hand away without kindness. I had placed both hands on my knees and stared at them until the owner of the wine house, René Aubert, burst into the courtyard, an arachnid man, all spindly legs and arms.

“Is this ringing any bells?”

“Not yet,” he says.

I wait a beat.

“What about now?” I make a joke, hoping it will lift this new strange mood that’s in the car.

“No siree.” He says in a quiet voice.

We pass some trees. The sun has set and their branches are ugly in the dark.

“Now?”

“OK Toots. Enough.” He reaches over and pats my knee. I glance over at him. He blinks heavily.

I focus on being a good driver for him. Smooth and calm, no jerky turns or hard brake-pumps. Maybe he is just hungry and tired. Also, his bum knee was acting up today. 66-year olds with bum knees become cranky when they are not fed on time. The goal is champagne; our night will be happy.

“Oh!” He exclaims.

“Something familiar?”

“No. I forgot my *breviaire*.” For the last 30 years, his dining ritual has been to make tasting notes on the all wines he selects and drinks. He scrawls them in his illegible chicken scratch in his leather-bound Day-Timer. But napkins and coasters are always an option for those scribbles. He is being difficult.

“Dad. Listen. I brought my desk calendar, if you need to make notes. Help me out here. Can you at least tell me where to park?” There are street spots

available, but our car won't fit into them.

He ignores me and goes back to focusing on something else, so I settle on a parking lot at the bottom of a hill that leads up to where I surmise the restaurant will be. Getting out of the car and looking at the slope up ahead, I immediately know he's going to complain about the walk. I wonder if I'm trying to provoke a reaction.

"But Tootsie, the hill. My knee. My poor knee!" I ball up my hands into fists, squeeze, and release. He whines like a child.

"We can take the hill slowly. Dad. OK? There was nowhere to park up there. I. Will. Help. You."

"Thank you. Thank you Tootsie." Three glasses of champagne pop into my head, bowing to me, then to each other, before lining up in front of my grabby hands. I imagine draining the trio in rapid sequence, and hiccupping merrily. Problem? There is no problem. Problems are for those who lack champagne.

It takes 15 minutes for my gimp to shuffle his way up the hill and into the town square. Each of the four sides is quaint. In the middle is a fountain. Surrounding it are two bistros, one bar and one restaurant. Faint music and lights pour out of each.

"So. Daddy. Which one is it?" I ask. I am careful about making my tone even. Maybe he is mad or sad or tired or hungry or some emotion I've never heard of.

"Hmm." He turns around and around – a dog chasing his tail in extreme slow-motion.

“Dad, I don’t want to rush you, because I am eager to eat a memorable meal at this memorable restaurant. But I am also very...” I stop myself before I say the word “hungry,” because I am worried that my needs will make him annoyed.

“Yes yes Toots. I think it is... eh... This one.”

“*La Garderie.*”

“Yes. But I can’t remember for sure,” he says dismissively, withdrawn. He feels like a bomb or a snail.

“Great then. Good enough.”

We enter, there is a bar. We stand in front of the bar, waiting to be seated in the dining room next door. Waiters come and go, making drinks behind the bar and carrying them to tables, not acknowledging us. My dad lets out a sigh. If only this sigh were louder, and were accompanied by a translator, or a Geiger Counter. Our family would have avoided countless hospitality disasters if a person or little machine would have begun screaming toxicity reports at the staff. These nights always, always, ALWAYS begin with a sigh, and, if the crappy status quo is maintained, always, always, ALWAYS end with my dad’s invective equivalent of Mount Vesuvius. Too many times I’ve watched him grow chilly and dismissive with a waiter for accidentally bringing wine from the wrong year, or blast the food and beverage manager of a hotel for allowing any soft triple-cream cheese, like Brie or Camembert, onto a complimentary cheese platter set in my dad’s room as a VIP gift. (Soft triple-cream cheeses stink up the room. Hard cheeses are acceptable.) There’s a minefield element to traveling with my father. “I love making people feel like *sheet* about themselves,” he says, “I would like to teach a university course in this.” My father’s boundaries are elliptical, and thought

they're impossible to predict, stepping over then is an exercise in arbitrary terror. It would take a team of good Jungian men to properly navigate them. Stepping outside the line is usually fine. And other times, you get your face and limbs blasted off.

I turn towards my father and tug on his sleeve of his navy blazer. He has cleaned himself up for our champagne dinner – his peppery-grey hair is elegantly combed back, his smooth tan face is brown as nuts and softly moisturized. His once-full mouth now droops a bit, from age, but remains firm above a strong jaw and tall neck. He is a fine gentleman, a movie star from the 1950s or 1973.

“Dad. Please. Please please please. We'll be seated, I'm sure of it. They have to seat us! It's the way these things work. It took us a while to get here, three more minutes will not be the end of the world,” I say, knowing full well that three more minutes could, in fact, be the end of the world.

“Tootsie, you're right. This is a night of celebration,” he says.

I sigh a sigh of relief.

A young waitress wearing a great deal of gold eyeliner sways over to us.

“*Vous voulez manger?*” “Would we like to eat? Yes, we would. My father takes in a quick breath and straightens himself so that he's at his maximum towering height. Before he can say “Well what the fuck else would we be here for, *con-nasse?*” I grin and respond, “*Avec plaisir.*”

She leads us to a prettily-dressed white table with a little candle. Returning to

the back section of the restaurant, she begins to joke with another waiter, a hot, chiseled man with a hairdo like the wig of a Lego figurine. My father watches her, unblinking. The temperature in my earlobes shoots up as I crane my neck around to see if she's making appropriate serving-progress. I feel a fleeting warmth in my chest and bathing suit area for the hot waiter, but I'm too worried to indulge in the abandon of server-lust fantasies. Maybe I think about him sucking on my wine-stained lower lip for one-half of one second, but I'm really just silently praying and laser-focused on the pile of untouched wine lists.

Oh Christ. The wine list. Bring us one copy of the wine list, bar wench. You're standing right by the goddamn stack. Seriously. That's all we need to fix this, to put this night back on the rails. The tiniest of tweaks... and we're back! Right there on the rails, where we should be. Girl, if you want to walk away from tonight with your life and your pride, you'd best bring us the wine list, you skinny cheap 1970s-knockoff teenage hooker.

I look at my father – whose eyes are morphing into flamethrowers – and feel the great heat descend from my earlobes down into the rest of me. It is not the good kind of heat. *Perhaps I'll just scoot over there and fetch the wine list myself! No, no. That's gauche, and only will anger him more. She'll bring it. I have faith. No I don't. She's going to give that waiter a blow job right in the middle of the restaurant. Wine list? The only feasible prospect of her bringing us the wine list if it is in his pants and he perches it on his penis and tells her to deliver it.*

Doubling over, she laughs at something the Lego man says and coyly puts her hand on his shoulder to right herself.

My dad raises his hand. I intervene before he can say anything disgraceful.

“Dad, please, when she comes over here, just ask her for the wine list. Please

don't ruin the evening. Please don't say anything that will piss her off. Please. Please promise me. Do it right now. Say 'I promise.' My stomach is feeble.

"OK. Toots. Relax. I promise." The words come out with no pauses in between. No pauses means no promises. I am not a fucking dummy. There will be no champagne tonight.

"No. Dad. Look at me and say you promise."

He glances at me and waves his raised hand, once, casually.

"*Excusez-moi, mademoiselle,*" he says, just a *tiny bit* too loudly. The other diners turn to look at the disturbance. With heroic lethargy, she walks over to the table. I look closely at her face. Under all the paint and defiance, there's the face of a girl. She's 18, maybe.

My father drums his fingers three times on the tablecloth and squints. That is it. A wave of premature hurt ripples through me.

"So," my father begins, "how would you like to proceed, *mademoiselle*? Would you like me to tell you how to do your godforsaken job, or are you so stupid I should simply do it for you?"

"*Pardon?*" she says. Her tone is deliberately offhand. Looking up at her briefly, I see that she is smirking, but with the wobbly mouth of a child. I fixate on the candle again.

"Obviously, my being here is a massive imposition, and your establishment magically keeps itself afloat by treating its patrons like dog shit, am I correct?"

My dad raises his voice by several decibels.

“Well, sir...”

Everyone who is eating has put down their cutlery. Everyone on staff has stopped in their tracks. All eyes are on us: Table Dystopia. The Lego waiter’s face is grim. A couple sitting at the table behind my father’s chair have their heads down. The woman mutters “*s’il vous plait.*” I think I hear her husband call my father an ass.

He goes on, arms flagging.

“Well sir what. WELL SIR WHAT? DO YOU NEED TRAINING? DO YOU WANT ME TO BE YOUR TRAINER? WHEN TWO PEOPLE WALK INTO A RESTAURANT YOU DO NOT DISAPPEAR YOU BRING THEM THE WINE LIST SO THEY CAN HAVE A DRINK. THERE, THAT IS YOUR TRAINING. BUT WHAT I WILL NOT DO IS SIT HERE AND PAY MONEY OUT OF MY WALLET WHILE I TRAIN YOU TO DO YOUR FUCKING JOB.”

I reach for my jacket and stammer, “Dad. Please just let’s go.” The room is swimming, cloudy. It is as though my eyeballs have been dipped in Vaseline.

He is still yelling as he rips his blazer off the chair, knocking it over.

The waitress says, “You’re welcome to eat somewhere else, sir.” In her hands is the wine list. She drops it accidentally. I pick it up and hand it to her, staring at her belt because I don’t want to look at her face. She thanks me in a small voice.

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My father storms through the restaurant, passing every table. I follow, wishing myself dead. Couples quickly cast their eyes down and stare at their plates. Two teens, eating with their parents, are muffling laughter.

When we get to the door, my father grabs the handle and jostles it. It is locked. Naturally. Why wouldn't it be locked? He jostles and jostles. God. Why. Why more of this? I know people are watching, and this causes jolts of pain to fire through my neck. Seriously. We have to get the fuck out. He has to get the fuck out of my way. His rage is obliterating his motor skills.

"Dad, let me get it," I whisper. He moves to the side; I unhinge the door. We burst out into the cool evening air and I drink it in. All is quiet, the wind from earlier has disappeared. Merry music continues to wander out from the other restaurants, the wide sounds cheerfully distorted, into the twinkly blue night.

I look up at him. Hot tears are pooling faster than they can splash out my eyes and it makes him blurry, as though I am seeing a reflection in a lake.

I want to scream, "What the fuck is the matter with you?" But I can't. I am afraid. I am afraid that he could turn his anger on me. He could just shoot me full of holes with it. Instead, I regress; I can practically feel it happening in my body. It feels like all my insides are being sucked up. I need to get mad at him, but I need him to stay with me. So like a little child I shout, "YOU PROMISED."

"But Tootsie, I was right. She was wrong."

"It doesn't matter who was right or wrong. What matters is YOU PROMISED."

YOU PROMISED ME. REMEMBER ME?" I yell these words as loud as I can, thinking for a moment that my volume will make up for their uselessness. It doesn't work. Not even close.

I storm off. I don't bother to check if he is following. I can hear his clip-clopping gait behind me. He is trying to catch up, but his knee is slowing him down. His poor, poor knee. Well fuck his knee. I speed up and set off down the hill to the parking lot.

"Tootsie!" His voice is far away. "Wait!"

I break into faster walk, almost a jog, then a pumping sprint, until I reach the Citroen. It is sitting shadowy and forlorn in the parking lot. Still sobbing, I turn on the ignition and jam the transmission into first, flooring the accelerator until the engine screams like a chainsaw. "*I'VE ENDURED AND COMPENSATED FOR A LIFETIME OF THIS FUCKSHIT BEHAVIOR.*" I bellow this to myself. I spin around and out of the lot, swerving towards his hobbling figure, which is not even halfway down the hill. The lights flash on him and he cowers a little. I wail on the horn. A thought skitters through my head, like a disoriented chipmunk darting out of a bush. For one searing flash of a moment, I think it would be a very funny joke if I were to hit him.



Chapter Two

Two weeks earlier, my father and I were dancing cheek to cheek.

We were in the Presidential suite of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal, on the eve of our wine odyssey, and we were joke-dancing across the freshly-vacuumed taupe carpet like we were in a village idiot's version of a Fred Astaire film. When my father dances, he notches up his alto voice to a warbling soprano and in a half-hearted, mumbling singsong croons things like, "Ehhh... eeee... we are danciiiiing... Here we are... danceeeeeng... da da da... do do do... cha cha cha... *danciiiiing...*"

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Our cheeks were smushed together indelicately like two old, forgotten oranges shoved in the toe of a Christmas stocking. My hand was on his shoulder, his hand on my waist. His right arm and my left one stuck straight out and were connected at the knuckles. We were a clumsy watering can, shuffling and hopping around the spent room service cart with its leftover Caesar salad smells, we mumbled his da-da-da-dancing song, our voices screeching higher and higher as we tried to contain the laughs simmering in our guts.

“OK. Enough!” My father let go of my hand.

“Thank you for the dance,” I said, doubling over in a splendid, ceremonial bow.

“No, thank *you* for the dance,” he responded, bowing lower.

“No, thank *YOU* for the dance,” I shouted, leaning into the bow until I fell slowly onto my shoulder. I laid there seizing in and out of my now-horizontal bow – a grateful epileptic.

Cackling, my father helped me up. I walked over to the darker taupe couch and began drawing a two-slice toaster on a pad of hotel stationery.

“Tootsie. Don’t mess around. Look at *zees*. Read it to me out loud.” He threw a thin bound document at my head. It hit me in the face and dropped onto my lap. At the top of the cover page, under a cover sheet of plastic were the words, “*Safari Vinicole en Terre de France*.” Our itinerary. Picking it up, I noticed the many pages inside.

“You really stacked this trip, huh Dad,” I said.

Chapter Two

“Start reading, Toots,” he ordered. He’d gone back to the Caesar salads and was running a crouton along the square ivory plate, ineffectively using the thing to collect smears of dressing.

“Monday, September 26th,” I read the date at the top of the page using the fake Cronkite-style broadcast voice I’d assumed while goofing around during rehearsal newscasts in the radio studio of my journalism school.

“Not the *dates*, Tootsie. The places.”

“Paris, then Contrexéville...”

“They make water there. It’s next to Vittel. There, they also make water. We will baptize ourselves with water before we become soaked with wine.” He sounded like a preacher, even though he is an atheist.

“Good news,” I said.

“It will take three hours to get there,” he announced.

“Then we spend the night in Contrexéville, then we go to Alsace...”

“Which will take another three hours.” He nodded his head, affirming his knowledge of his homeland’s geography.

“The next day, we have three meetings. Rémy Gresser, Manou Massenez and Alex Heinrich.” I looked up from the page and saw that my father was pretending to sleep, chin on chest. Feeling my gaze, he pursed his lips to generate drool. I went on.

Chapter Two

“The next day, we are going to the Alsatian baby donkey farm to buy a dozen baby donkeys, each of whom I will name after one step in the Alcoholics Anonymous program.”

“OK. Sorry. I’m back.” He opened his eyes wide and shot me an open-mouthed grin, like he was coming out of the most restful hypnotic trance.

“We have a tasting at Clos Isenbourg, with Alex Heinrich’s sommelier.” I paused to think. I realized I knew nothing about Alsace. Madly flipping through my memory’s Rolodex, ripping out cards, throwing them on the floor, I willed myself back to his wine cellar in New Jersey, where we’d lived when I was small. We lived in a house, yes, but on the weekends I was forced to live in the cellar, my father’s cellar. The cellar in which I’d stand, feet freezing, nose choking on clammy air, loving my father as equally as I hated that cellar and the oenological lessons he was so pathological about imposing on me there.

Suddenly, in a fit of synesthesia, I remembered something. Alsace has green bottles.

“Go on,” he urged.

“Alsace has green bottles,” I said.