

Continental Repast

Marty and Kate hitchhiked to Dover on a grey day in late spring. They stayed in a student hostel that night, and in the morning boarded the ferry for Calais in France. The wind whipped across the channel and the chalky cliffs did indeed appear white, though Marty, as they receded into the distance.

When the ferry docked, they went to a small cafe where Kate tried to order ice cream, to comfort herself in the strange, foreign place. But nothing Kate said could make the waitress or the proprietor understand. The young French waitress brought hot tea with lemon and Marty and Kate drank it.

Kate had convinced Marty to come with her on this continental adventure. Kate had a housekeeping job at Hothorpe Hall, a neglected manor house in Leicestershire bought by the Lutheran church to provide help for Lutheran refugees in England. But in the spring she was restless. She wanted to visit Sam, the American serviceman she was in love with, in Germany, and maybe get as far south as Greece.

The Magnussons were taking an Easter trip to the continent themselves and didn't need Marty. Marty wrote to Aunt Rose, who sent her \$200 for the trip. Kate and Marty became members of the International Youth Hostel organization, planning to see how far their money would take them. Marty had just turned 21, as had Kate a few months earlier.

Kate was prettier, with soft dark curls which framed her face, big bones and wide hips. She wore a short coat over her blouse, a skirt and flats. Marty's hair was a pile of dark thatch unless she rolled it into curls. She was thick in the waist and her face was very round, her eyes sunk behind the upturned frames of her glasses. She wore a blue polyester sac-like coat with white buttons. The each carried a small train case with a change of clothes in it.

The hot tea tasted good on the cool, grey day. Marty pulled out *Let's Go: Europe*, a guidebook specifically for students, and spread it out on the table between them. At least it was in English.

"I don't think we can make it to Paris tonight," said Kate. It was late afternoon and neither of them wanted to hitchhike after dark.

Marty traced a route with her finger, peering at it near-sightedly. "There's a hostel in Boulogne-sur-Mer. Do you think we can make it there? It's only a few kilometers."

"Sure," said Kate off-handedly. It was cold, growing dark and raining as they left the little café. "Wait!" said Kate. She stopped at a shop where plastic rain hats were sold. "I'll buy a red one and you can get a white one!" she said. The hats had wide brims which kept the rain off their faces.

That night they stayed in a large rambling dormitory room in what had once been a Norman chateau. Hardly anyone was about and it felt gloomy and strange. In the morning they set off as quickly as possible. When the smell of fresh bread wafted through the air as they walked down the stone street, Marty's heart leapt up. They bought milk and croissant, baked that morning, and ate them by the side of the road in the misty rain.

Thumbs out, they quickly got a ride to Paris where they found the student hostel with some difficulty. It was in a large imposing building which must once have been a lovely mansion. People circled about but no one seemed to be running it. Trash lay about in the large rooms with beautiful woodwork. Kate and Marty looked for a bathroom they could use and were astonished to find, in the large white-tiled bathrooms, that there was nothing but a hole in the floor. No one had cleaned the toilets and toilet paper and actual human feces lay around them.

“Turkish toilets,” sniggered a French student who tried to help them. “Americans? This hostel is full, but maybe you can go to the other one.” Marty got out her guidebook. On the Paris map, he pointed to a location near the center of the city.

By the time they took the metro to the other hostel it was late afternoon. It was in similar condition, also full. Kate shook her head. What were they going to do? It was raining lightly and they had nowhere to go. “Dinner,” she said.

They settled into a warm bistro and ate a good meal of fish and potatoes, taking as much time as they dared. “We’re going to have to find a hotel,” said Marty. But where would they find one they could afford this late in the evening?

It turned out they were near a large open market called Les Halles. Small carts and trucks were parked outside a series of open structures. The wet, fresh scents of flowers enveloped them as they passed. People, mostly men, wandered about, shouting at each other, loading and unloading vegetables, fish, meat. It was noisy and companionable. Seeing the two girls walking in their shapeless coats, men shouted to each other, “Ah, rouge et chapeaux blanc!”

Kate thought it was funny. “I guess we are a novelty,” she said.

But it was becoming less funny. They were dropping with tiredness and they had no idea what to do. A handsome young man came up to them and began to speak broken English. “American?” he asked. His head was bare, but his hands were stuffed into the pockets of his woolen coat.

“Come,” he said, leading them out of the rain and under the vast steel structure which housed the stalls of the produce, meat and flower sellers.

“Yes,” said Kate, following him and smiling. She shook the rain off her coat and took off her hat.

“It’s okay,” said the young man. “Doesn’t matter if we don’t buy.”

“The men laugh at us,” said Kate. “The ‘rouge et blanc chapeaux!’”

“It’s okay. You are students? My name is Pierre.” He shook out damp, dark curls. “May I buy you some pommes frites?”

Kate accepted gratefully with her easy sociability.

“Hot food. It is nice,” said Pierre. “Where are you going?”

Kate explained that they were too late to find a hotel they could afford.

“Oh, good!” said Pierre. “You will find one in St. Germain tomorrow. Easy. Not dear. Tonight you will talk with me.”

There was nothing else to be done. Carrying their train cases, the two girls followed Pierre to a cart which gave off the tantalizing smell of hot oil and potatoes.

“I don’t have money, but it makes me feel good to buy you something,” he said. “I am looking for work. I will find it soon.” He handed paper packets of hot potato fries to Kate and Marty.

Marty liked the romantic name of potatoes in French, pommes des terre, apples of the earth. Coming in out of the cold rain, and eating the hot, salted potatoes, felt delicious. Following Kate and Pierre, Marty hung back, as they walked along the wide aisles, looking at everything through drooping eyes.

Sausages and hams hung from hooks. Crates full of vegetables Marty had never seen before spread all around them. So many colors, peppers in green, yellow and red. Big purple bulbs, piles of apples and onions, oranges and lemons. Heads of lettuce, cabbage and greens, herbs in bunches. Mushrooms and cheeses and fish and shellfish on ice. Smells assailed her and men smiled at her as she straggled behind her friends.

In the flower stalls, branches of blossom alternated with pussywillows, tulips and roses. Lilies stood in pots and small clumps of violets were tied together with twine. In fact, being sleepy-headed made the things Marty saw glow and pulse with life.

At four a.m. Pierre showed them into a booth, joining some of the produce sellers, making them all safe for each other. Pierre explained that the girls were traveling south, students. Roasted snails reeking of garlic were produced, baguettes of bread and glasses of wine. Kate looked nervous as the dish of snails went around.

"It's okay," Marty nudged Kate. "I've eaten them before. They're delicious," she whispered. Neither of them had much courage alone, but together, using each other's very different gifts, they were fine travelers.

"Vive l'Amerique," sang out an old man in a woolen cap and vest, raising his glass. "Vive la France!"

They all raised their glasses.

"Is the food for restaurants?" Marty asked Pierre.

"For everyone," he said. "Brandy?" he asked. "They want to buy you a brandy."

When they finally left, the sky was much lighter.

"You'll find a hotel," said Pierre. "Merci por la marche avec moi," he said to Marty. "Here is Notre Dame. On the other side of the Seine you will find a place peu cher." He pointed south.

"Mille fois merci," said Kate, picking up phrases from him. "We are happy to meet you."

With a small salute, Pierre left. Marty and Kate sat sleepily on the steps of Notre Dame as the full sun lit the front of the cathedral, warming them. When people began to go into the church for mass, they did too, sitting on rickety woven chairs near the front in an almost empty chapel. Sunshine streamed down through the medieval colors of the windows and organ music rolled out into the space. Marty fell asleep as she sat and Kate had to dig an elbow in her side when they were supposed to stand up.

An hour later they arrived in the office of a small hotel on Rue St-Julien-de-Pauvre. It only cost a few francs, the equivalent of \$3. Marty was astounded. The room was white and beautiful with a double bed and beside it what looked like a urinal. "What's this?" asked Kate. Neither of them knew. But the room did have a real bathroom, with a real toilet. The two girls fell asleep and slept until early afternoon.

In Paris they ate croissant and hot chocolate in the mornings. Wandering the streets, they looked for Shakespeare and Company, the bookshop and lending library Sylvia Beach had established for American expatriates in the 1920's. Hemingway had been a frequent borrower and she had published Joyce's books. They found the address Marty had written down 12 Rue de l'Odeon from Richard Ellmann's book. It was nothing but a nondescript doorway. Nothing showed of its original spirit or the artistic and literary adventures the building had sheltered.

The most wonderful museum in Paris was the Jeu de Paume (they didn't even try to go to the Louvre). In its large white rooms dedicated to different artists, Marty wandered, wonderstruck. On the walls of the Salle Monet shimmered Monet's cathedral paintings, lavender in the light. The unforgettable water lilies hovered in their huge paintings, more about the sky and water than the flowers.

After a few days they went to Dahn, Germany, where Americans were stationed. Sam Forland, whom Kate had gotten to know her last summer at Wittenberg, had given her the address of a room in the village he rented with three other friends.

The room was in an old-fashioned cottage, with two big double beds under the low eaves. The American soldiers took their leave in this room, listening to a record player, smoking and cooking up banana skins, which were rumored to get you high. Negotiations for the beds were heated. Kate got on with Sam, but Marty's heart was in Oxford, England. She was anxious to leave.

Heading south through Italy they were picked up by a thin woman who drove very fast and ate an enormous meal beginning with a plate of pasta when they stopped at a road house. Even after Irene Magnusson's wonderful cooking, Marty was astonished by the intense tastes of a piece of Italian pizza. So simple, but so delicious. They stayed in a wonderful old building which had become the hostel in Milan.

Kate could not stop talking about Sam. She wanted to go over every detail of the visit. "I do think he likes me," she said. She had spent every moment of the day with Sam, while Marty wandered disconsolately through the little German town with the son of the German landlord, climbing the old castle ramparts and walking through damp parks.

Marty sympathized with Kate's need to talk. She responded by describing Glyn to Kate, but she had much less to tell. She had only met Glyn after class and gone once to the theatre with him.

Heading south, an older and younger man picked them up. After driving a little, the car turned off onto a side road. The driver stopped, looked back at them and mimed with his hands that he wanted to sleep with the girls. The younger man looked on appreciatively. Kate and Marty jumped out of the car and the driver gunned his motor, driving off. They had to walk back to the highway. Kate was outraged, but Marty thought it was normal. What did they expect, anyway?

When they got to Rome, there wasn't a single place to stay. "I'm sorry. It's just not possible," an American told them at the hostel. "It's Easter and the city is full to the brim!"

They went to the train station and got on a train for Brundisi, where they would catch a ferry to Greece. There was nowhere to sit on the train. It was full of troops. Marty sat on her train case in the corridor for hours. The troops stood all around them in brown uniforms and plastic-brimmed hats, young and friendly. Marty didn't feel friendly. She was exhausted, once again awake all night.

Early in the morning they transferred to the ferry, and watched the grey-green horizon to the east as they crossed the Mediterranean. Greece began to emerge in the mist. Igoumenitsa, on the Greek shoreline, had white buildings with a forest-covered mountain behind it. They had breakfast in this fishing harbor town at a small white taverna while they waited for the ferry back to the island of Corfu, their destination.

On Corfu, the student hostel was in the country on the other side of the island from Kerkyra harbor. Crowds of children begged to help them at the ferry, but they had an address and found a bus. They were dropped off on a dusty gravel road in the late afternoon. Bells around the necks of long-haired sheep rattled in the fields. They began walking, carrying their trunks. Beside them were the twisted trunks of ancient grey-green olive trees. Marty felt drained, weary and empty.

"Don't worry," said Kate. "When we get there we don't have to do anything." She had pushed them all the way to this Greek island in the hopes of sitting on a sunny beach on the blue Mediterranean.

All of a sudden as the road twisted, a large tree laden with oranges appeared. It looked like a tree in the garden of Eden with its dark green leaves, as refreshing a sight as Marty could imagine along the dry, stony road. Its shining orange globes hung like Christmas

ornaments in the light. They sat down on a rock wall to rest for a moment, which turned out to be on the grounds of the hostel.

A man at the desk pointed them to a small room with a wash basin, twin beds and windows which looked down through gnarled grey-green trees onto a rocky beach below. The porcelain in the wash basin was cracked, but everything was clean. A fresh wind blew off the sea through the open windows of the spare, white room.

Kate and Marty tried to find the dining room in order to have something to eat, but none seemed to exist. They found tables in the garden and sat down. Trees enclosed the small lawn and shadows lengthened. At last a girl came out of the hotel, but there was no menu and they could not make themselves understood.

When she went away, Kate and Marty looked at each other. Here they were. They planned to stay for several days, but the building was virtually empty.

After a little while the young girl came back with plates of tomatoes and olives drenched in olive oil. The olive oil tasted odd to Marty. She wasn't used to it. She badly wanted a piece of bread with butter, but there seemed to be no way to get it.

In the morning, they went down to the rocky beach, but it too was deserted. The sun was brutal and there were no trees. The rocks ran almost down to the water. After one day on the beach, Marty looked like a lobster. The skin on her shoulders and face was burning. Even her scalp was red under her thin hair. But the sun had knitted her body together, made it all of a piece. She felt burnished by the wind and sun.

No one was about the country villa the whole weekend Kate and Marty were there except the girl in the café who brought them, whenever they sat in the garden, plates of tomatoes and olives drenched in olive oil. The rocky beach was also deserted. At last they ran into a solitary English-speaking guest who told them that the family who ran the hostel was celebrating the Greek Orthodox Easter, the most important holiday in Greece.

Sunday morning bells rang out, but Marty and Kate could not tell where they came from. There was only the small hostel building hidden in the trees and the beach below. Marty would have loved to go to a Greek Orthodox service, but she and Kate were strange holiday-makers and could not intrude on the family's solemn rites.

It was too far to take the bus back to town, but they were getting hungry. Kate managed to buy from the hostel a can of Spam, some crackers and tinned fruit. They took it down to the beach, contrived a fire and roasted slices of Spam over the fire for an Easter celebration. Marty wore a long-sleeved shirt and her white plastic rain hat against the sun. Kate's skin was darker and fared better. The beach was almost too rocky to lie on.

"It's not exactly what I imagined," said Kate, as they sat watching the sun set across the water before going to bed.

"No," said Marty. There was no luxury at all. "But we're making the best of it." The heat made her speechless, lazy. The sun-drenched, empty days were a solace to her little northern soul.

The next day they took the ferry back to Igoumenitsa and a bus along the coast road to Athens. The ancient bus careened along roads built at the edge of frighteningly steep cliffs. Far below was the beach. At night they were still traveling. Looking down, as the bus twisted and turned on the road, Marty watched the white surf curling against the shore in the moonlight. The surf was always there, the tides passing in and out in beauty, whether she saw it or not. When she was in cold, rainy cities, the surf still pounded on these beautiful, empty beaches.

In Athens, things were easier. They met English-speaking tourists, ate at restaurants painted blue and white and drank retsina, a licorice-tasting drink, outdoors at tables in the

treeless square in the warm nights. Everyone seemed to smoke. But there were small round breads with sesame, delectable pastries made with filo dough, meat and rice wrapped in pickled grape leaves, grilled meats and yogurt with honey. Nothing tasted like what Marty was used to, but it tasted good. Greece was simple, sun-burnished.

Marty loved the narrow streets not made for cars and climbed up many steps. She looked longingly into courtyards, with doors into rooms open to the sun and swept clean by the wind. Greece felt empty, elemental. So this is how people live, sleep, eat, she thought.

At the American Express office, a letter from Mother and Dad awaited Marty. They had gotten two postcards from her. "Grandpa passed away on March 10," said Mother. "Grandpa didn't have to linger too long in his illness and he was surely ready to go, but as Dad said, 'It's a humbling thing to see one's forebears pass away.'" Dad asked, "How could you go to Rome without seeing the ancient Roman buildings, its coliseum and so on?"

Kate and Marty climbed the Acropolis and looked at the marble remains of the Parthenon, acres of white stones against an intensely blue sky. Next to it was a modern reconstruction of a stoa, garish in its glistening, unweathered stone. Built by Americans to assist in studying and preserving artifacts archaeologists found, it looked out of place beside the ancient stone, gnarled old trees and distant views.

Marty tried to feel what Dad might have felt. He had studied Greek and Latin so as to be able to interpret New Testament writings and the church fathers. But, even with all the literature she had read, classical Greece didn't live for Marty. Greece was a dream, dry, rocky, empty, drenched with sun, next to the sea. I could stay here forever, Marty thought. The empty days had loosened some elemental underpinning, awakened senses she didn't know she had. But they were running out of money, Kate was restless. They were expected back.

Kate and Marty hitchhiked north. On the main road, trucks were the most common vehicle. One stopped for them and they climbed high up into the cab of a great, iron grey truck. It looked old and somewhat decrepit, but they were glad for the ride. The cab was grimy, the seat covered with a dirty blanket. Marty sat on it gingerly.

A thin, weathered man in old brown clothes, the driver pulled an unmarked bottle from behind the seat and began to drink. He handed it to Kate and Marty. A sip of the hot, fiery liquid was enough. "Schnapps," he called it. "Verboten," he said, smiling and drawing his hand across his neck. They had no language in common, but Kate tried. They did not even know where he was from. They were heading into Yugoslavia.

In English, Kate talked quietly to Marty about Sam. She would see him soon. Marty did not want to go back to the village of Dahn, Germany. She would drop off in Karlsruhe and spend few days by herself. They would meet up in Amsterdam a few days later and take a ferry back to England.

The truck headed north all day. Rocky outcroppings laced the fields, where sheep grazed and olive trees leaned into the wind. By evening, they entered a city where there were no lights. "Beograd," said the driver. Marty found it on the worn map of Europe she carried.

The truck's headlights illumined hundreds of people milling in the darkened streets. The faces looked aimless and the people didn't seem to speak to each other. What were they doing? Marty did not know, but their anarchy made her glad she was high in the cab of the truck. They drove past what looked like a cinema. Even this building was dimly lit, except by headlights.

The driver, who was wrinkled and wizened though probably not that old, didn't want to stop. He produced bread and sausage and shared them. Marty couldn't eat much of the greasy sausage, but the bread was delicious.

All night they crawled north on the highway, through terrain with no light in the distance at all. There was no moon by this time and the truck's headlights and a few oncoming vehicles which met them on the highway provided the only light. The driver showed them his bed behind the seat and Kate crawled back to sleep in it, but Marty bounced, going in and out of sleep in the dirty seat in the cab high over the road. They climbed hills and floated down, the driver nipping Schnapps from his unmarked glass bottle.

As the colors of dawn began to pearl the sky to the east, Marty's head was sluggish and felt like it was full of bees buzzing. The driver stopped to get gas. Kate and Marty used the bathroom and the driver bought them Turkish coffee at a shop. It was thick and sweet, full of sugar or honey.

They climbed back into the cab of the truck, which now felt like home. The driver put a gigantic bar of chocolate wrapped in gold foil on the dash. It was at least three feet long! Marty could not believe her eyes. Her mind could not compute that it could be breakfast. Coffee and chocolate! What a way to live. Kate unwrapped the foil, broke off some chocolate and ate it. Marty was frightened. Chocolate was her undoing!

It rained as they continued north, the wet spring weather making the high cab of the truck an ark which time had forgotten. They would never find land. Kate, thinking of her Sam, was on one trip, Marty thought, but she was on another. She sat, wonder-struck, nibbling chocolate from the gold foil, so open she could hardly believe what she saw around her. She was sinking like a stone to her own depths, finding space in herself for everything she had seen, letting it take her, carry her off.

The whole trip had been mind-bending, Marty reflected. First something frightening happened, assaulting their senses and making them wonder what to do, and then an entirely unimaginable resolution would take place. One thing after another. It was what they had come for.

At last the truck driver motioned that he would stop. It was the middle of the day. He was going to sleep. They must get out. Marty and Kate thanked him profusely. He had helped them get very far north.

It was still raining when they put on their red and white plastic hats and stuck out their thumbs by the side of the road. Another truck stopped for them, this one somewhat sleeker, newer. The driver was young and looked well-nourished, his face smooth and pink. "Germans?" he questioned. When they told him they were Americans, he gave a long, low whistle. "Whooo!"

In the late afternoon, the driver said, "Zagreb," and motioned that he would leave them there. "Hotel," he said. "Zehr Gutt!"

The truck pulled up in front of a modern skyscraper with "Hotel International," inscribed in metal letters across the entrance. "Zehr gutt!" said the driver. The girls thanked him and carried their small baggage into the lobby. It looked expensive, but they knew they must pay for a comfortable night.

Surprisingly, it was less expensive than it looked. Marty rejoiced. Perhaps there would be a bed! A shower! Warm food. They were given a key, took an elevator, and found themselves in a large room, with windows which looked out into the rainy evening.

The beds were topped with eiderdowns, thick white coverlets stuffed with goose feathers. Marty slipped under one and lay flat on the bed under its pillowy warmth, very happy. It was all she could do, a few minutes later, to get up and wash.