

Rachel Hall

HEIRLOOMS

They left behind furniture. Of course, it was too bulky, too big to bring to America. Out of the question – the armoire, the walnut dining table with feet like claws, though it was at this table their destination was decided, their future set in motion. And it was here the child, Eugenie, did her schoolwork each night, its surface pocked with her efforts, the indentations testament to her diligence and precision. They left marble-topped dressers, bookshelves with glass doors, a settee covered in a geometrical print, Eugenie's bed where she had cried at night, thinking her sobs private.

Her Aunt Lise and Uncle Jean's bed had been his parents', its headboard painted with posies by his mother. This they left for a friend, but when he came to retrieve it later that week (petrol being hard to come by still), it was gone, stolen by the landlord's son and installed in the apartment of his mistress on rue Vincennes.

They left family. Lise's brother, in a mass grave in Poland, in a town with a name like a howl. Her sister-in-law, the child's mother, buried in Saint-Malo. They left a trunk of the tiny embroidered dresses she'd made Eugenie, and bloomers, smocks with scalloped hems, the stitches so small they were nearly invisible. One or two of these garments might have been saved, so small they wouldn't take up much space. No, it is better not to think in this way, Lise decided. Better to think instead, "useful," "necessary," "indispensable."

They left Jean's mother in Montpon, the village where she was born. She, in black since the previous war, in the back garden, bent over her lilies. "Go on, then," she had said. "Go!"

She hadn't wanted to cry. Afterwards, she prayed the rosary for them – her only son, his Jewish wife, and the child who wasn't theirs.

They left the bakery Jean's father had left him. They left the wicker baskets of breads, the glass shelves in the front windows lined with tarts and cakes, the air heavy with sugar. Jean kept the recipes in his head, but in America they will fail. Cakes are soggy, soufflés fall, meringues don't harden. Later they will learn that the bakery became Montpon's first modern laundromat.

They left friends like the Laurys, the Gelas, the Moreaus. People who knew them before the war, knew Jean's *gateaux* when flour was plentiful, remembered Lise's laugh, the surprising way it started out loud and then simmered on. When the child was ill, Monsieur Gela drove his bicycle into the country and came back with black market eggs. Madame Laury played the piano in her parlor and they all sang "The Marseillaise" though it was forbidden and "Au Clair de la Lune." Their voices rose together, Jean's hearty baritone guiding them. There are photographs from these times – the girls smiling despite their many layers, their knees knobby in too-short dresses, the women's lips heavy with red. The men are all handsome, hair slicked back, clean-shaven. The word that comes to mind is dapper. They seem not to make men like these anymore.

They left words, phrases, a sureness with language. Their mother tongue. They left their names because they proved difficult for Americans. Jean became John; Lise became Liz; and Eugenie, a name like a brook flowing, became Genny.

In America, they will speak French together in their home, but in this confined space, the language turns reedy and thin, a plant growing without light. The child is glad after only a year to shrug off the last of her accent. She can, after much practice, manipulate her tongue to form “*th*.” “*The theater is closed Thursday,*” she can say, “due to *the threat of _thunderstorms.*” She is an American girl now, walking to Thomas Jefferson Elementary School with her hair in long braids, penny loafers on her feet. She passes the cemetery gate of their new city with hardly a thought.

The new language makes them miss their old friends, people who laughed at their jokes. In the new language, it turns out, they are not funny, only odd. There are other problems, too. The American habit of concluding a meal by saying “I am full,” which in French means “I am pregnant.”

They left money – only a small amount – in a bank in Saint-Malo. They meant to close the account on numerous occasions, but it was in the child’s mother’s name. They had her death certificate, but not the proper guardianship papers to prove they were adopting the child. So many papers after a war! Is the money there still, accruing interest? Perhaps they are rich. The child thinks of this money for many years, thinks of what it could buy her – crinolines like those of her classmates, a stucco house with an oval swimming pool, a sister.

They left books about history and politics, songbooks, novels, several journals containing sketches and notes. They left the child’s schoolbooks and report cards, a book she won for high marks – about the Queen of England, of all things. They left an old address book filled with the names of people they realized they never really knew.

They left the sound of cathedral bells and their reverberations through the narrow cobblestone streets. They left the chants of schoolgirls skipping rope outside their window, of mothers calling into the dark, “A table maintenant!” They left the thunder of boots stomping up stairs, loud knocks, shouts, and then pleas. They left this, but not their fear of the night, and an attentiveness, even in sleep, to the possibility of loss.

For a long time, the child will look at any new place with an eye to hiding. Under the kitchen sink? The narrow cupboard by the stairs? Behind the thick bushes in the park? One day she realizes this habit has left her. It, too, is gone. Still, when she looks at photographs from before the war, she can’t believe she is that grinning girl, can’t remember what it was like to feel such joy.

“Sometimes,” Lise will say, “I find myself wondering where something is – an owl brooch set with turquoise eyes or a particular square platter. And then I know: it is gone.” She shakes her head, laughs at her forgetfulness.

It turns out there are things that cannot be left. The very nature of secrets, for instance, insists that they be kept. The child savors hers like a smooth candy in her mouth. She believes her father is alive somewhere, hiding still. Perhaps no one has told him the war is over. Perhaps his journey home has been long and difficult. Perhaps he is already waiting for them in America, his arms extended in welcome. Sometimes she is certain she sees him turning the corner, exiting the Metro, but it is some other man who only resembles her father. He takes the arm of the woman beside him, pulls their child into an embrace.

Lise cannot leave her desire to have a child. It will dog her onto the ocean liner and across the Atlantic, on the long train ride, and from one airless apartment to another. All her life holding other women's babies, her eyes tear up, her throat tightens.

Walking home early one afternoon, days before they are scheduled to leave, Jean smokes an American cigarette and wonders how he will ever learn to like their paltry flavor. He is alone on the street at this hour, the businesses closed for lunch and rest. His eye is drawn to a dark alley where papers flutter in a down draft. As he gets nearer, he sees that the paper is money. The wind makes it lift and soar, spiraling back down to rest near his feet. He scoops it up, stuffs it in his pockets, but can't fit it all in – there is so much! He isn't far from home, and he runs there to get a box or a bag. Inside, he pulls the money from his pockets, starts to call for Lise and the child. The bills, he sees now, are old and funny looking. He looks carefully and sees that it is money printed during the French Revolution. The edges are crumbled and torn. He can buy nothing with this. Later, he will take the bills to an antique shop and find they are worth little. They are not even pretty to look at, printed as they were in accordance with the revolutionaries' utilitarian ideas.

It is a silly thing to take when so much else has been discarded or given away or sold. What will he ever do with it? Still, he cannot forget the way the bills sailed in the wind, how he felt running toward them, hope lodged in his throat.

