

Brenda Ueland Prose Prize – Honorable Mention

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IN THE CEMETERIES OF SAINT-MALO

The numbers occupy her as she walks these unfamiliar streets. At fifty-eight, Genny is twice the age her mother was when she died. Her mother was just a girl, really, younger than Genny's daughter Sophie is now. There is other math, too, the math which is all subtractions, a tally of things lost: one mother (dead), one father (dead), one husband (divorced), one breast – the right one (cancer). Usually Genny avoids this list, but she is tired from the travel – the long plane ride, the delays in New York, the crowded train from Paris. She has come to France this summer to direct a study abroad program and has arrived a week early to see the place where her mother died. Though she has been to France many times – the summer program is popular and Genny is the department's best-liked professor – she has never visited Saint-Malo.

The cobblestone streets and stone buildings look familiar, she thinks as she walks, but this is because they resemble those in other French towns she has visited. In each she has been surprised by the shabby quaintness, the imperviousness to time passing. From the outside the houses must look as they have for decades. Now, before her, she sees a nun leading a line of uniformed girls into the Cathédrale St. Vincent. There is something undeniably French about this scene, and it excludes her, just as the houses do with their patched stucco, window grates, planters of red geraniums by their doors. She is home, but no one waits with arms outstretched.

Overhead, gulls squawk and trill. Genny can smell the sea, though she hasn't yet seen it. It is not far now to her first destination.

In the Syndicat d'Initiative, she is taken to the bureau of tourism. The man behind the desk introduces himself as Monsieur Fallard and invites her to sit. He is wearing the nicest suit she has ever seen, of a material so supple she wants to reach out and touch it.

“What may I do for you?” he asks in English.

In French, Genny explains what she wants. There is a slight, nearly imperceptible change in Monsieur Fallard's face when he hears her French. She continues, withdrawing the death certificate from her purse. She knows the date of her mother's death: August, 1939. What she would like to know is where her mother, a Jew, might be buried.

Monsieur Fallard sighs. “Those were bad times. A pity, Madame Horton, and matters got worse before they got better. ”

He is about her age, Genny thinks, maybe a little older. If things had been different, they might have been schoolmates.

“The records, Madame, are kept at the cemeteries. There are three that were in use at that time, all with a Jewish section.” He writes the names of the cemeteries on a piece of paper and hands it to Genny. “This one, you are not far from now. The others are farther away.

“*Merci, Monsieur,*” Genny says, rising. “You have been very helpful. ”

“I hope you will take in the other sights while you are here. The beaches are some of the most beautiful in Europe – the rampart walkways, Ilê Cézembre, just a short boat ride away. Lovely, and there is a legend about it involving a three-tailed lizard which you will find interesting.”

Genny thanks him again, relieved he doesn't ply her with the glossy pamphlets displayed by the door. She departs, her sensible shoes squeaking over the marble floor. In France, everyone is a historian. In the States, the past is the past. Her students don't remember

Chernobyl; to them, the first Gulf War was about T-shirts emblazoned with the American flag. The Jews in Israel have only ever been the oppressor. And where is she on this spectrum? Her run-in with history has left her knowledgeable, but, like most Americans, she finds the past a bulky, inconvenient thing. And the present keeps getting shorter, faster, like a train she must run to catch. She doesn't like to think back to her surgery just six months ago.

The cemetery is only a five-minute walk from the mayor's office. It is under tall old trees, on top of a hill. The wrought-iron fence surrounding it buckles in places, sways out in others, but inside the fence it is tidy, well-kept. The graves are close together with less ornamentation than she is accustomed to. After the war and the news – long-suspected – of her father's death in a camp, Genny's aunt and uncle adopted her and took her with them to America. Why they settled in Colma, California, a city known for its number of cemeteries, Genny will never know. She was eight years old and had lost both her parents.

In the Cimetière Saint-Malo, Genny walks the rows until she comes to the Jewish section, recognizable from a distance by the rocks lining the grave markers. Here she stops to read the stones: René Rubin, b. 1916, d. 1957; Natalie Bouchard, b. 1937 – the year Genny was born – d. 1987. Genny tightens her sweater around herself. By Natalie's grave, maroon and yellow pansies grow. She moves on to a row of smaller markers, worn smooth from years in the salt air. Genny cannot make out the names. Perhaps one of these is her mother. What will she do if she finds her grave here? She isn't the type to fall prostrate on the grave, weeping and moaning, can't see herself having a conversation with a mother she can't remember. Even if she'd brought flowers to plant (not something she'd considered before seeing all the flowers here), who would care for them when she left? So far, Genny has thought only as far as the search.

At the caretaker's building, she raps on the door. It's opened by a young man with ruddy cheeks. She expected someone older, grizzled. This is not a job for the young.

"*Bonjour, Monsieur,*" she begins. "I am looking for a particular grave."

Nodding slightly, the man beckons her in and motions to a chair. He sits behind a desk and writes something on a pad, then extends it to her.

"*Je suis sourd,*" she reads.

He is deaf. His youth in this place makes sense to her now. He can't hear the grave digger's shovels hitting the rocky soil, the mourners crying. On the pad, she writes her request. She fishes the death certificate out of her purse and passes it over with the pad. He takes both and leaves the room. When he returns, he is carrying a black ledger. The binding says 1938-39. As he opens it, the binding makes a cracking noise and Genny smells musty dampness.

He motions for her to look with him. The pages are filled with the cramped, dark handwriting of another generation. It is hard to decipher, but it appears the deaths are listed by date. In August of 1939, twenty-three people were buried here, but not her mother. She double checks, even flipping ahead to September.

On the pad, she writes, "*Elle n'est pas ici. Merci.*"

The man nods again, seems to shrug his shoulders, though perhaps he is only stretching. Outside the gate, Genny crosses Cimetière Saint-Malo off her list.

By the time she reaches the second cemetery, the sun is high in the sky. Here, there are fewer trees, and many of the flowers are plastic. The real ones look parched and browned at their edges. Again she walks to the caretaker's building and explains her situation. When she is done, the caretaker rises to retrieve the record books. He is gone a long time, and his office

smells of his lunch. When he returns with the records, Genny sees it is the same kind of big book as the first cemetery – heavy and black, the years inscribed on its spine.

“*Merci,*” she says, taking the book.

“*Vous êtes Belge?*” the caretaker asks.

And she is forced to explain her past. Her mother’s death, her father’s death, the move to America.

“You have a small accent,” he says, “but other than that your French is very good.”

This happens often when she comes to France. All those years of speaking French only with her aunt and uncle have altered her French, tinged it with something no one can quite place.

“I have a cousin in America,” the caretaker says. “In Philadelphia.”

“Very nice,” Genny says, before opening the ledger. This cemetery must be bigger, because in August, 1939, almost fifty people were buried here, but not her mother.

“These records are absolutely complete?”

“*Bien sûr.* I wish you well on your search.”

Genny thanks him, crossing this cemetery from her list. Her mother must be in the third cemetery. Naturally it is the one she chose to visit last. Oh well, she will have lunch and then proceed.

The restaurant she chooses opens out to a small courtyard. Tables surround a fountain, its insides coated with a velvety moss. Genny orders the prix fixe – paté with cornichons, coq au vin, and a salad with vinaigrette, which comes with a glass of wine. She is glad to sit down in the cool courtyard, glad the French are used to lone diners. At another table an elderly gentleman eats and reads a newspaper, his dog curled by his feet. It is nice later when the man

and woman at the next table turn to her and introduce themselves. They have noticed her guidebook on the table, and assume she is American.

Their names are Matthias and Beata. They are here from Hamburg to celebrate twenty years of marriage. Beata's smile is broad and welcoming, but her eyes keep blinking as if she has something in them – an eyelash or a bit of dirt. Matthias's well-trimmed beard is peppered with gray.

“Congratulations,” Genny says. Some quick calculations and she decides they must be in their mid-forties. Younger than she, too young to have known the war, but what of their parents and grandparents? It seems rude to think this in the face of their friendliness. They have even offered her a glass of wine from their carafe.

“Please,” Beata says, “and bring your chair around.”

Genny surprises herself by agreeing. In two days she will meet up with her students in Paris. Then there will be lost luggage to locate, homesickness to tend to, but now it is nice to have someone to talk to. The silence of her day has left room for the needling thoughts she'd rather not have.

Matthias, it turns out, is a professor of animal husbandry, and has been to Iowa, to the very university where Genny teaches, known for its agriculture programs. Beata is a librarian, and they are parents of two sons—ages twelve and eighteen. Beata takes a photo from her purse to show Genny. In the picture the two boys wear bright-colored parkas and stand next to each other on a ski slope.

“Fine-looking boys,” Genny says.

“And you?”

“Yes, a daughter, Sophie. She’s twenty-nine. The only pictures I have of her are old ones, school pictures, but here is my granddaughter.” She hands Mia’s picture across the table.

Their response is what Genny has come to expect: “She looks like you,” Beata says.

It is true, though Mia is blond and blue-eyed, and Genny has dark hair, dark eyes. She can’t say what features are hers on her granddaughter’s face, but when she looks at Mia, she has the feeling she has seen her somewhere before.

“We look forward to being grandparents one day,” Matthias says. “How lucky you are.”

Genny remembers something someone said at a cancer survivor group when Genny had mentioned her mastectomy discomfort. “I just feel lucky,” the woman had said, “that I can hold my grandbaby and watch him grow up.” Yes, Genny thought, but what of the scar across your chest? The body’s ridiculous asymmetry? The pads required to fill your bra, that daily reminder of your lack? She hadn’t returned to the group after that.

“What brings you to Saint-Malo?” Matthias asks.

What he means, Genny thinks, is what has brought her to Saint-Malo alone. Its attractions are obvious for family vacations, romantic getaways. She intends to tell them about the study abroad program, but she finds herself (is it the wine?) telling them of her search.

“So you are French then?” Matthias asks.

“Yes and no. I became American.”

“I see.”

Genny is even more surprised to hear herself say, “I had breast cancer last winter.” This is something she rarely talks about with anyone, let alone new acquaintances. What has she done? She waits for the awkward silence, or worse, the pitying looks and loud, syrupy exclamations of regret.

“I as well,” says Beata. “Two years ago.”

This is so unexpected, Genny thinks she might laugh – or cry. “I am sorry,” she says, instead. “Are you well now?”

“We hope,” Beata says, shrugging. Her eyes blink more rapidly.

Does something about Beata’s brush with death show on her? Is this what prompted Genny’s confession? Maybe you can’t take away a woman’s breast and expect her to go unchanged elsewhere – her eyes, the set of her mouth, her posture as she ventures out in the world.

The talk turns then to treatments and doctors, to remission and soy. Through this, Matthias is quiet but engaged. When Beata can’t remember the name of a drug, he supplies it. By now it is getting late. The waiter has long ago cleared their plates and glasses. He glowers by the courtyard doors.

“I should get back to my search,” Genny says.

They exchange addresses. Matthias will perhaps come back to Iowa, and Beata encourages Genny to visit Germany.

“Good luck!” they call down the cobbled street. “Good-bye.”

The last cemetery on her list is inside the walled city. It is small and dark, in the shadows of the wall. The caretaker’s building is by the front gates, and Genny goes there directly. Again she knocks on the door, prepares to explain herself. The door is opened by a middle-aged woman in a flowered house dress.

“Come in, come in,” she says. “You have caught me on my way out of town. How fortunate, *non*? Even in an hour, there would be no one here.”

She listens as Genny explains what she is looking for. Then she rises and walks to shelves which Genny hadn't noticed as she entered. She takes a book from the top shelf.

"This is the year our records begin – again you are fortunate. You look for August?"

"Yes."

"*Et voila,*" the caretaker says, handing the book to Genny.

The printing is very small and the light is poor, but she must be here, Genny thinks.

There is nowhere else to look. On the second page, Genny's finger rests on her mother's name: Esther Dondich, age 27, *épouse de* Gabriel Latour, row 13, square F. What does she know of this woman? She has seen a few old photographs. In each, her mother looks different – thin and pensive in one, plump in another, unreadable in yet another. Genny has her passport which lists the place of her birth as Latvia and gives the names of her parents, people long dead. She has her aunt's stories, but they are imprecise like the photos, and even grainier, as if overexposed.

"Come, I will show you where she was," the caretaker says.

"Was?"

"Naturally . . . I thought you would know." She stops. "I am sorry, Madame. This is a small cemetery in a small country, not like America."

"Excuse me?" Genny says.

"Regularly it becomes necessary for us to make room. The coffins are dug up and the remains disposed of. You can see we are crowded to the rafters as it is, and people do not stop dying."

Horrible, nasty remarks pop into Genny's head, but she can't speak. She remembers photographs of corpses stacked in front of concentration camp barracks, piles of human bones buried in pits.

“Would you be interested in seeing the plot?” the woman asks. She is trying, Genny sees; this isn’t her policy after all, but Genny can’t stand to look at her anymore.

“I will find it, thank you.”

Genny finds row 13 and moves sideways from there until she reaches the seventh gravestone. The plot is occupied now by Sabine Samuelson, who lived to the ripe old age of ninety-three. It looks like any other grave site. Did she attend her mother’s burial, Genny wonders. There are no memories, just a solid black space. And how did her aunt explain her mother’s sudden absence? What can one say to a two-year-old? Her aunt no longer remembers. She is eighty-three after all, though she tells the story of coming to take care of Genny when her father was stationed at the Maginot Line and Esther was dying, and how the child Genny reached up to her and said, “*Maman!*” Genny suspects that much is left out of this story, though it isn’t that her aunt and uncle didn’t love her, care for her, drive out to farms to buy her black market eggs until the war ended. There were no other children.

What is she doing standing in this graveyard? It seems urgent that she get out. Clutching her purse and her guidebook, Genny Horton, *née* Eugenie Latour, walks briskly to the front gate and exits. If she were not suddenly so tired, she would leave for Paris immediately.

Outside the cemetery gate, she sees the stone ramp that leads to the walkway. She moves toward it though it will take her in the opposite direction from her hotel. She is winded when she reaches the top, as if she has been pulling a great weight. She stops to catch her breath. The sea before her is beautiful – gray-green stretching to meet the blue sky. The beaches are emptying out, though it seems early, only three o’clock. Genny watches as people fold up their brightly striped chairs and umbrellas. A little boy runs squealing and naked for the water, and his father scoops him up, scolding. The vendors are no longer hawking their refreshments. They move

hurriedly towards the ramparts, pushing their small, stainless steel carts. The sunlight glints off the carts, making Genny squint. She remembers something: Her aunt had been instructed to buy Esther a metal coffin, recommended for its durability. When Genny told her of her plans, her aunt had remembered this detail. What else is not remembered yet? Or lost forever?

She turns her back to the sun. She can go tomorrow to the *île*, learn the local legend. She is telling herself that her time here hasn't been wasted, but she doesn't believe it. These are just words to screen herself from what is opening up inside her. Her hand flutters to the place where her breast was and then down to grip the stone wall. If she begins to cry now, how will she stop?

The ramparts are suddenly teeming with people from the beach, sweaty and smiling, carrying big straw bags, umbrellas, armfuls of towels. A young couple kissing nearly walks into her. She watches the people pass, moving toward the cafés and pubs of the city center.

Bitterness rises in her, but this at least is familiar.

When she looks back out at the sea, the beach is gone. She understands now: it is high tide. She has read in her guide book about the abrupt tidal shifts here. The water comes in so quickly that each year, unsuspecting tourists are drowned. Below her, the dark waves smack against the ramparts as if angry. The sandy beach is completely covered by the waves. Except for a plastic beach toy bobbing up and down, it might not have existed at all.