What My Host Mother Sees

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What My Host Mother Sees
By Emma Cooper

Our First Week Together –

It’s after 10PM and she has been talking on the phone in her room since we finished dinner about an hour ago. Although I cannot quite understand what she is saying, I try to read her tone through the closed door to her room. Is she homesick and upset? Is she content with life in France? I’m not quite sure. She has only been here for a few days; maybe she doesn’t know how she feels yet, either. But she speaks quickly, hastily through the phone; to me, it sounds as though she is stringing all of her words together into one. From my desk outside of her room, I can hear her footsteps on the hard-wood floors as she walks from one end of the room to the other. She goes back and forth repeatedly as she talks; she is pacing. Perhaps this is because she is nervous – living in a new home, navigating a new city, speaking a new language. The newness of it all seems like it would be overwhelming to a young-American college student.

From the open window next to my desk, I can hear cars racing down our street and people talking on the sidewalks below. Emma tells me that Dartmouth is in la campagne – the countryside. As I look out the window, I wonder if the cars and the sounds of the street bother her while she tries to sleep at night. I hope she isn’t too bothered by it, but I will be sure to ask her tomorrow. I can tell that she is quite tired. I can see it in her eyes, by the way they seem to fade when she returns back from school in the afternoon – and, of course, from the fact that she sleeps-in until the very last moment in the mornings. I know that adjusting to this new time-zone and daily routine takes time, I just hope she doesn’t stay up talking and pacing too late into the night before she is able to fall asleep. As I’m finishing up my work at my desk, I think I can finally hear Emma laugh into her phone. This makes me smile. I hear her say, “I love you so much!” to whoever is on the other end. It occurs to me that she is probably speaking to her own
mother back home. I hope that her mother knows that I will look after her, that I will feed her well, that she’s in good hands; if it were me on the other end of the line, this is what I’d want to hear, too.

*Our Final Evening Together* –

It’s after 10PM. The whole family – myself and Laurent, our two daughters Marie-Pia and Alice, and, of course, Emma – are gathered in the salon. We have just finished our final dinner together before Emma must leave and return home to Les États-Unis. I started making dinner early this afternoon; bought the best *foie gras* in Lyon from the specialty market, made crepes with lemon, sugar, and butter, and opened up a good bottle of *Bourgogne* for the occasion. During one of our many dinners together, I taught Emma my favorite way to eat crepes – with lemon, sugar, and butter, of course. Now, this is her favorite way to eat them too! I am so pleased that she has tried new things at my dinner table. I remember when she told me that her father is a professional chef – not to mention, he’s a French chef! I told her that this made me so nervous to cook for her. However, I know that having a father who is a chef contributed to Emma’s appreciation for our culture around food. During her time here, I made sure to feed her well – as most French mothers and fathers know how to do – and to show her as many of Lyon’s dining specialties I could make. Lyon is, after all, the gastronomic capital of the world! She tried new things adventurously – *foie gras, camembert, saumon fumée, quenelles, tarte praline*...these are the foods that bring us joy, and I know that they’ve brought Emma joy, too. Tonight, we sat around the dinner table for hours – talking about our time together, laughing, and wondering about when our paths will cross again in the future. We told Emma that she must return to Lyon one day – maybe when she has a family of her own. They are all welcome here, *chez Fenoyl*. Instead of going back to our rooms after dinner, we all stay up together, talking in
the salon over an expresso. Most nights, at this time after dinner, Marie-Pia and Alice have already returned back home to their apartments, Laruent and I have gone to our room, and Emma has gone back to hers. Tonight is different. Emma does not say goodnight right away. We all linger in the salon, sipping our expresso slowly to keep the moment from fading away.

Tomorrow morning, I will take Emma to the airport very early. I know that she will want to sleep in until the very last moment; I know that she will be tired. But tonight, in this moment, she does not look tired. Her eyes are not fading as they sometimes do. They are bright and full – just as curious as they were when she first arrived, but now, when I look at her from across the salon, I realize that something in them is different now. It takes me a moment to put it together, but suddenly it comes to me clearly. In French we say courage – to embody a belief in oneself, a profound essence of confidence, a true sense of assuredness. In this moment, I look across at Emma, and it becomes clear to me that – 10 weeks later – she now embodies courage.