

To Remember You By

Written by
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Fifteen years ago, my first love shared with me a secret to freeze the hands of time. This secret was given to me by a Parisian girl by the name of Noémie. Sometimes she shows up in my dreams. But when I wake up, she's always gone.

May 6, 2010

While most young girls lose their toys, I lost my home. Besides pieces of my mother and father, my earliest memory of home was in Saint-Roch's foyer de l'enfance in Nice, France. On my first day, the head matron of the facility welcomed me outside the heavy iron motorized gates. She was short for women her age and wore a long black robe that swept the concrete when she walked. The sun was high in the sky, and I was grateful for my father's singed baseball cap. It had been glued to my head since it was pulled from the fire. I was a frail girl then, scraped up,

and swollen-eyed. The matron plump with dark oak hair she fashioned into a bun. She and Claire, the social worker, greeted one another with a cheek kiss.

The social worker towered above me, so much so that her whispers to the matron were out of my ear's reach. The only words I could make out were *traumatisme* and my name. When Claire finished speaking, she smiled tightly down at me and drove away. The head matron patted her hands on the sides of her dress and bent down closer to me.

"Alo, my blue child. I am Eloise, but please, call me Madame Eloise. Tell me, what's your name?" I did not respond because I had just heard the social worker whisper about me to her. "No need to be shy, dear. Go on." I stared, letting silence fill the air. The head matron tilted her head at me. A flicker of disapproval flashed in her eyes. "I hope we can find you a new home here. Viens." The head matron walked past the iron gates and opened the double doors in a grand, sweeping motion that did not match the interior and said, "Welcome to *Saint-Roch's Foyer de l'enfance*. Your home away from home." The smell of disinfectant and bleach clung to every surface.

Madame Eloise gave me a tour of the two-story floor plan. There was a common room with dessin animé, a courtyard with corde à sauter, a music room, a cantine, and... "Oh, let me show you to your dorm." I followed the madame down twisting hallways filled with wide-eyed children, up the stairs. This lasted until we arrived at the seventh door down the hall. A bronze "2 G" plaque was nailed in the upper right corner of the doorframe.

Madame Eloise politely knocked twice before opening the door. 2 G was a small room with two bunk beds pushed against the left and right walls. Two ottomans accompanied each foot of the beds. Opposite the door, a large arched window overlooked the courtyard. I stepped forward and peered down at the scene from the window. Natural stone paved the courtyard until

it kissed the perimeter of blooming jasmine and orange blossom flower beds. Beside them were rambunctious children running in circles. Others played a game of pétanque. Over by a tall oak tree, another group of kids brandished finger guns at a boy who froze and put his arms up. What should have been a jovial display filled me with poignancy, because wherever I looked, there was the same expression I'd lost: a smile.

"You came during la récréation, so your bunkmates are all out. Try to make friends with them. Maybe you'll feel more comfortable talking with someone your own age." I silently tightened my grip on the strap of my backpack. Madame Eloise bent down to my eye level again, and this time, I looked at her more closely. Madame had a pair of the kindest eyes I'd ever seen. When she looked at me, though, they seemed sad. "Celestine," the madame said softly, "I know this all may seem scary. You're going through a lot of change right now. I know it won't be easy, but you can start over here. Would you like that?" I blinked in response. Madame frowned and then stood back to her full height. "Other kids have lost here, too. You're not alone."

A boy and a girl suddenly whisked down the hall, laughing and screaming at ear-splitting pitches. "Lea! Thomas! No running in the halls!" The children's laughter abruptly ended, followed by a rehearsed and equally high-pitched "*Désolée*, Madame." The madame placed her hands on her wide hips and shook her head. "These kids..." She looked back at me. "The girls' showers are at the end of the hall. You're not to trespass into the boys' under any circumstances. We're serving lunch in la cantine in an hour. Think you can remember the way there?" I thought about it, then shook my head. "That's ok. Once your dormmates get back, you can tag along with them. Now go on, settle in." Madame Eloise stepped out into the hallway and quietly closed the door. A calm silence enveloped me. I welcomed it with open arms. Seconds later, my bubble of peace was popped when Madame's voice bounced off the walls, chastising another child.

I turned around and felt myself shrink inside the space. Such a stark contrast to the colorful bedroom I had been in just days ago, before my world turned upside down. I set my backpack on the left bottom bunk and sat. The mattress was hard and had uneven springs that poked into my backside. I got up and tried the bottom bunk on the right. It was much more comfortable, so I took my bag and emptied its contents onto the mattress.

On the bed were four faded shirts, three trousers, and a pair of dirty sneakers. The last remains of Celestine spilling onto the sheets. I unzipped a pocket and retrieved the final item from my backpack: a discolored picture of me and my parents. The only remaining photo that cements they were here before they weren't. I study the way the lines on our faces curve into toothy smiles until my eyes become blurry. I tug down on the brim of my father's cap.

"You're on my side." A small voice said behind me.

I quickly turned to find a girl with caramel braids and a half-eaten Carambar in her hand in the room. *When did she open the door?* I thought. My lips slightly curved into an *oh*, and I swiped all of my belongings back into my backpack. When I looked up again, she was inches away from my face. "Eww. What happened to your face?" I leaned away from her judging eyes. Another girl wearing chunky combat boots and a plaid miniskirt clumped into the room. She had short, black locs that lightly brushed her shoulders.

"You did not brush your teeth for you to be that close, Emma."

Emma's freckles now looked like polka dots. "Did too!" The nameless girl ignored Emma and cast her calm gaze on me. "Tu es la nouvelle?" I nodded. "Emma's been sleeping on that bunk ever since Geneviève was adopted by a Czech family eight days ago. This one's mine." Her nails, perfectly painted in black, pointed to the bed with the hard springs. "You can have any of the top bunks."

I suddenly became hyper-aware that I was in the middle, and both she and Emma were looking at me, waiting to choose. It's not much of a choice. I walked over to the left side and hoisted my backpack on the top bunk, above the mystery girl's. She raised her hand. "Bienvenue, bunkmate." I awkwardly clapped her palm. "Moi c'est Noémie. What's your name?" She asked. Eagerness and curiosity kept her in place, but I didn't answer her. I haven't answered anyone since that fateful night. I waited for the usual look of disappointment or disinterest to dawn on her, but it never did.

"I think Madame Eloise said her name was Celeste," Emma said.

It's Celestine, I thought, but didn't correct them.

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At lunch, la cantine buzzed with the sound of plates scraping on tables and clanking cutlery. I waited in line and held out my tray to the kitchen matron. A thin slab of steak haché and lukewarm purée plopped onto the plate. I took it without a word, then turned to wander around for an empty table with Noémie and Emma. Underneath the endless murmur of children, I heard whispered fragments of conversations.

"Did you see la petite nouvelle?"

"What happened to her eye?"

"Je ne sais pas, but with a face like that, she'll never find a home."

All the other noise faded into the background. The chewing, the forks, the trays hitting the tables. Everything faded, but the voices. And they were all pointed at me. I didn't feel my head drop; I just knew I went from seeing tables full of whispering kids to staring at my dirty Geox's.

“Six months later, and your tête de noix is still here. You’re not one to talk.” Noémie snapped at a boy nearby. A hush fell over the crowd. She took my hand and guided me out of the cafétéria, leaving Emma and the other watchful kids to gape from behind.

I saw Noémie in a new light then. She wasn’t just fierce or beautiful.

She was a friend.

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May 12, 2010

“Do you know why I’m here, Celestine?” Elle asked.

The madame had introduced Elle as a therapist assigned to me by the court. She was supposed to be someone who could help me with my “trauma.” I didn’t know more about it than that, and I didn’t want to, but here I was. We were sitting in a spare room on the first floor that Madame Eloise had set up for us to use. Elle sat across from me in an expensive nude pantsuit in such a way that the folding chair looked elegant, like a large Victorian-style armchair. A Manila folder with the label “Moreau, C.,” rested comfortably on her left ankle, which was crossed over her right knee. She waited patiently for me to respond, and when I didn’t, she continued again. “Your social worker, Claire, tells me that you haven’t spoken since the accident. I’m here to help you feel safe and strong so you can use your voice again. We’ll figure out how to do that together.” She slid a blank sheet of paper across the table to me, along with a box of sixteen sharpened colored pencils. “You can talk to me or you can draw. C’est votre choix. You *always* have a choice.” I stared at her for a moment before slowly shifting my gaze down to the blank page. “Do you remember what happened?” Elle asked. I don’t want to, but I nodded. “What can you tell me about it?” My hands curled into a ball. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I shook my head.

“Can you draw it?”

I debated before inevitably picking up a black-colored pencil. I scratched it across the page, sketching harsh and rugged lines around the borders until they consumed them. The edges curled into smoke, then black, inky spiderwebs that enclosed the frame as if threatening to swallow it whole. I then sketched a stick figure with angry eyebrows and big ears and grabbed the red-colored pencil, scratching his face red and scribbling horns on him. I drew two more stick figures with Xs for eyes sprawled on the floor, then colored the floor red too. The more I drew, the more anger I felt boiling beneath my skin, bubbling off my fingertips. My grip on the pencil tightened, a coil inside of me slowly winding tighter... and tighter...before springing out and snapping the colored pencil in two.

“Take a deep breath,” Elle said, eyeing the red on the page and the red in me. “Let’s step away from the drawing.” She looked at the worn baseball cap sitting atop my tangled curls and added, “I like your hat.” I tugged the brim down to hide my eyes, but couldn’t hide the faint smile that crept on my lips. “Was that your dad’s?” I nodded. “Your dad has good taste.”

Had. I thought, but didn’t correct her.

Her manicured nails lightly tapped on her clipboard. “Do you understand what happened to your dad?” I stared at the Xs I drew on the stick figure’s eyes, then at her. I nodded curtly. “And your mom?”

I glanced down and saw the stick figure’s eyes bulging off the page. I crumpled the drawing into a ball and launched it across the room. It landed with an unimpressive plop, and I wished then it were glass, shattering into a billion tiny pieces. A cloud of yearning thundered and crackled above me, threatening to downpour. I could almost smell her Dior J’adore fragrance then. Could almost hear her sweet voice singing me lullabies.

I'm *done* playing this game. I harshly scooted the wooden chair back, its legs screeching against the hardwood floor, to leap to my feet.

"Celestine, please sit down." But my left foot was already planted in the hall. I slammed the door hard enough to feel it in my arm, but the ache behind my ribs didn't budge.

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That night, when I closed my eyes, it wasn't the smell of Dior J'adore I remembered.

It was smoke.

My bedroom was swallowed in black, save for a single slit of light flooding from beneath the door. I sat up slowly and got out of bed. My feet touched the floorboards, and I instantly knew something was wrong. The floor was warm, alarmingly warm. Pulse drumming in my ears, I reached for the doorknob. My skin singed at the touch. A strangled sound lurched from my chest as my hand flew off the handle. I snapped my head left and right, forcing my brain to think. Think! My comforter. I wrapped the thick fabric around my hand and twisted the boiling knob. It gave way with a reluctant creak.

Billowing smoke poured in like a living thing, curling around the ceiling and drifting across the hallway into my bedroom. I stepped out, coughing as bits of smoke clawed at my throat. My vision blurred, but through the haze, I saw them. My parents. Face down on the floor. I called for them, but three heads, instead of two, snapped when they saw me. Across from them was a man, bathed in fire and shadows, holding a gun in his hands. I ran to their side, ignoring the soles of my feet sweltering, and just as my fingers grazed my mother's back, she crumbled into ash. The fire surged. My father incinerated next. I turned and stared into the eyes of what I can only describe as a demon. It raised its arm, and *BANG*. I bolted upright, drenched in sweat.

I couldn't fall back asleep. I lay awake thinking of my parents: Gerard and Lunelle Moreau. My silent tears streaked into my hair as I turned my body towards the wall. I slipped my hand underneath my pillow and pulled out the picture of us. Soft moonlight spilled into our bedroom, lighting the darkness just enough so I could see them. I only remembered this photo from what they had told me. It was my first day of l'école maternelle. My father had hoisted me up so my short legs were midair, while my mother supported my right foot. Our bodies were squeezed tightly, with little me at the center. As much as I wish I could have remembered more, I couldn't remember anything as vividly as that night.

Long after Madame Eloise's espadrilles stopped clicking down the halls, when all the lights under the dorms' doors faded out, and the nightmare was nothing but a distant dream, I felt a tug on my blanket. I shifted my sleepy eyes at the source and saw Noémie up on the ladder. She brought her finger to her lips and motioned for me to follow her down. I was too restless to go back to sleep, so I slipped out from under the covers and climbed down to meet her.

Noémie was wearing a night gown and thick socks. She raised her index finger, then bent down to fish something from beneath her bed. It was too dark to see what. She crept past Emma's snoring bunk and opened the dorm door. It gave way with a *creak* that didn't seem to faze Noémie or Emma. Outside, the hallway was cloaked in shadows, lit only by the soft green glow of "sortie" signs above the stairwell door. Noémie tiptoed past the threshold. "*Allez*," she whispered. I looked to my left, then my right, and quietly shut the door behind me.

Rain beat against the high-arched windows. It sounded muffled through the glass yet was slightly louder than the pitter-patter of our socked feet on the wood. Noémie led us down the stairs, past the cantine, and toward a small door tucked behind the courtyard stairwell. She pulled

a key from her sock and jiggled it in the lock until—*click*. Noémie pushed open the door. The room was warm with the scent of damp jasmine and old wood drifting through the vents. She held the door open for me, then locked the door and strutted towards the center. I followed on tiptoes. Noémie walked past a grand piano, acoustic guitars, and a tambourine to stop at an old lecteur de CD sitting beneath a broken metronome. She pulled out what she had plucked from beneath her bed and placed the CD into the lecteur. She pressed a button, activating the machine's clicking and whirring. First guitar chords, low and soft, spilled out, then a girl's voice followed. Raw and powerful. The droplets of rain traced slow lines down the glass window above us as the sound of rainwater continued to hit the windowpane. We sat beneath the windows listening in comfortable silence.

"Music always makes me feel better. It's hard to be sad when I listen to it," she said, her voice barely louder than the music. The glow from the moon leaked in from the window, lighting up parts of the room and parts of Noémie. She cast her curious, brown eyes on me. "You don't talk much. Do you?" I looked down at my hands. "Are you shy? Nervous?" I shook my head. "Tu parles français?" I nodded. "Just not aloud," she said more to herself than to me, "It's ok. I can tell you're not like the others." I glanced at her, but she was staring out the window. Outside, thunder rolled low. Inside, the song switched to the next track. I twisted my fingers awkwardly, not sure what to say. But she didn't need anything back from me. Not now, at least. It was just rain. Just melodies. Just me and Noémie. And maybe that was enough.

"What makes you say that?" I said so quietly, I thought I'd imagined my own voice. "J'y crois pas!" It looked like Noémie had seen a ghost. "Did you just talk?" I dipped my head shyly as a slow smile spread across her face. When I looked back up at her, she played it down. "Well,

when everyone first gets here, it's a battle of the sob stories. It's so stupid. But with you, it's different. We all have stories. I want to know yours, Celeste."

The sound of rain hitting the windowpane sounded like music in its own right. I preferred it over the thumping drums blaring out of the CD player, but Noémie seems to like it. And I think I like her.

"Sure about that?"

"Try me," Noémie challenged, leaning forward. I followed a line of rainwater that split into two as I answered her, "Maybe someday. And it's Celestine."

"What?"

"My name. It's Celestine."

Noémie repeated my name as if she were trying it on for size. "*Celestine*." I liked the way it sounded when she said it. "Why didn't you correct me earlier?" I shrugged.

When the second track ended, there was a moment where all that could be heard was the rain hitting the windowpane. Before the singer's magnetic voice poured in again. In truth, I hadn't corrected her because it didn't matter that she knew my name before, but things are different now. I'm different now.

~

June 5, 2010

Noémie and I sat criss-crossed in the courtyard, eating our lunch under a lemon tree. Blades of grass prickled my ankles as a leaf fell into the bœuf bourguignon the lunch matron had served three days in a row. "Blegh. You think bourguignon is the only meal the matron can *make*?"

"She probably made too much the first time."

“Then, leftovers are her specialty,” Noémie said, sipping on her Tropical Fruit Shoot. “As much as I love sneaking out, are we eating out here because you like leaves in your food or cause you don’t want to go back in the canteen?” I plucked the leaf out and chewed in silence, staring down at the ladybug crawling through the grass. “If you don’t stand up for yourself, they’ll never stop picking on you. Take it from me.” When the ladybug flew away, I looked closer at Noémie.

“You used to get picked on?”

“Bien sûr! They said I’m too much like a boy to be a girl.”

“You’re too pretty to be a boy,” I confessed. Noémie’s spoon stopped mid-air. She blinked a few times, looked at her spoon, then laughed, lowering it back onto the tray.

“Thank you. Now that your eye is back to normal, I can tell you’re pretty too.” She chuckled, and I smiled at the sound of her laughter. Then, she adopted a serious tone. “Can I ask you a question?”

My stomach began to twist itself into knots, sensing the excavation ahead. She had seen the walls I’d built, brick by careful brick, but day after day, she studied the schematics and learned how to make them fall inch by inch for her—as I did.

“Ever since you got here, I’ve heard you cry in the top bunk above me every night. Pourquoi?” Her question struck like a slap of cold seawater on the Promenade. I didn’t know how to answer her without coming undone, but there was something in her voice that made me want to try.

“If I answer your question, will you answer one of mine?”

“Bien sûr,” Noémie replied with her hand over her heart. “Ask me whatever you want.”

“OK...I’ve been crying every night because of the nightmares. I miss my parents, and at night, they visit me in my dreams. Except they’re always...” My voice cracked as I trailed off. Noémie’s face fell, as if she never considered the possibility.

“Je suis désolée. A lot of our parents gave us away. I don’t know why I assumed the same for you. You don’t have to say more.”

“It’s ok. I want to.” I took a breath before starting again. “Since the accident, every night, I look at our photo, and it makes me feel closer to them, but lately, it’s only been making the nightmares worse.” Noémie fidgeted with the lace of her boot before scooting in closer; our knees lightly brushed against each other.

“What happened to them?” Noémie asked. I briefly looked into her eyes before looking away, shaking away the thought. “Too soon?” I nodded.

“I just wish I could remember more about them. All I seem to remember are the bad memories.”

“You know what helps me?”

Before the question had time to leave my lips, Noémie latched onto my hand and ran out of the courtyard. We sprinted through the halls, taking the stairs two steps at a time to arrive at 2 G. She swung open the door, dropped to her knees, and pulled out a peeling metallic box from underneath her bed. She popped open the lid to reveal a Blast CD, a cross choker, a French hand mirror, and a sea of black nail polish. My eyes flickered to hers. “What am I looking at?”

“My memory box! I’ve gotten close to a few kids over the years, and I know exactly what you mean about wishing you could remember more of the good memories. With these,” she motioned to the items in her box, “I can.” She picked out the CD, “Blast was my and Anaïs’ favorite band. The family who adopted her gave it to her as a gift, and before she left St. Roch,

she gave it to me. She was the only other punk rock fan here. I miss her.” I knelt to sit beside her. “Was that who we were listening to last night?”

“Oui! Did you love it? Isn’t the lead vocalist magnifique?”

I nodded genuinely. “After I listened to her songs with you, I slept all night.” Noémie nodded, pleased, as if that were her intent all along. She put the CD back and picked up a bottle of black nail polish. “These remind me of Belle. Belle was a troublemaker—worse than me. One day, we snuck out of the foyer de l’enfance and walked to the square with the pigeons and the blue chairs to sneak into a Sephora. A Sephora! Belle convinced this woman to pay for some of our stuff, but the rest,” she motioned to the sea of polish, “I stuffed down my skirt.”

“Why your skirt?”

“Parce que! Even if I were caught, what would they say? *Lift your skirt?* It was genius!” I smiled at her enthusiasm and looked back at the memory box with a newfound appreciation. Noémie continued, “*Heyyy!* Your parents’ photo can be your first memory in *your* memory box. You have to make more happy memories to fill it up.”

“Like...a time capsule?”

“Like a time capsule!” Noémie agreed.

I liked how it sounded. I’d remember that. Now it was her turn to honor our agreement. “It’s my turn to ask you a question.”

“Tirer,” Noémie said.

“I was wondering...” I cleared my throat. “Why?... You’re so sweet and-”

“I’m not sweet.” She corrected me.

“Then why have you been so nice to me?”

Noémie blinked slowly as if someone had just asked her if the Eiffel Tower was in Paris.
“Because I like you, Celestine.”

I swallowed my saliva, “I like you, too.”

~

September 23, 2010

Before long, summer had slipped away. The plane trees along the street had begun to shed their yellowed leaves, floating in the breeze before landing in the l'enfance's courtyard. The air carried a mix of salt from the sea and the faint sweetness of overripe figs.

In the afternoon, Noémie and I ate lunch in our favorite spot just beneath the lemon tree. We talked lightheartedly about our likes, dislikes, and dreams. When she asked me questions about my parents, I told her that my mother was a botanist and my father taught CE2. When I asked about her parents, she simply said, “I was left at the hospital when I was born.”

“And you’ve been here ever since?”

She nodded. “Almost ten years. I guess they were hoping somebody would come back.”

I said the only thing that seemed right. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not so bad. Who needs parents anyway? My friends are my family.”

Despite her tough exterior, her façade began to crack. “But in a place like this, family gets split up and replaced all the time.”

“How do you stay so strong?”

Noémie thinks before replying, “People come and go. But if I put them in my memory box, it’s like they don’t leave all the way.”

“I won’t leave,” I said assuredly. I watched the curves of Noémie’s lips perk upward and felt mine doing the same. Her soft hand slowly left her boot to rest on top of mine. I froze for a

moment before I mustered up the courage to turn my hand, palm up, so our fingers interlocked and squeezed ever so gently. As we stared deeper into each other's eyes, her features appeared closer and clearer by the second. I watched her lips begin to part until Madame Eloise approached us, and the moment was lost.

"Celestine. It's ten minutes past two. Mademoiselle Elle has been waiting for you. Go meet her in the conference room. Now." My shoulders slumped as I looked at Noémie.

"T'inquiète. Come find me later. Promise?" She held her pinkie out for mine. I smiled as they became one. "Promise."

The madame's brows lifted two inches at us, but she said nothing. I got up and dusted grass petals from my pants. As I began walking to the classroom, I heard Madame Eloise speaking softly to Noémie (which was strange because the Madame never whispered.) I stopped walking to listen closely, slightly turning my head. I noticed Noémie's face cloud over as the head matron said, "The Arnette's are here to see you again." I looked at Noémie, but she wouldn't meet my eyes. Or rather— couldn't. When Noémie got up and the Madame began to turn, I bolted out of the courtyard and disappeared into the halls.

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October 2, 2010

While other kids studied their subjects and practiced their English in the common room, I was confined inside four white walls. With Elle. Again. "You seem a little lighter today," Elle said, watching me study the grey trunk of Babar the Elephant in the corner. "The last few sessions have been hard. I wonder if any of what we talked about still feels heavy." I thought about it before landing on *yes and no*. I settled on shrugging my shoulders as a sufficient response. "That's okay. I'd love to hear how our sessions make you feel, but you don't have to

talk until you're ready. And when that time comes, know your voice is safe with me." I nodded. Elle exhaled a breath I hadn't realized she was holding and leaned back into her chair. "Good. The most important thing I want you to learn from our sessions is how to carry grief without letting *it* carry you." I stared blankly at her. *Is that what this feeling of loss is called? Grief?*

"Ce que je veux dire, c'est..." she hesitated, then switched back to English. "Moving forward, I won't ask about your parents until you're ready to talk about them. D'accord?"

I nodded.

"Do you have any questions for me before we begin?"

I shook my head.

She slid a sheet of paper and the same box of colored pencils over to me. "Bon. Can you draw a picture of you and the friends you've made since coming to the foyer?" I sketched a picture using bright colors of me and Noémie underneath the lemon tree. "You made one new friend. A girl?" I nodded. "Is she like any of your other friends?" I shook my head. "What makes her different?" *How can I explain that she's different because she's the first?* Elle sees me struggling and rephrases her question, "Why do you like this new friend?" I started sketching. I lifted the paper to show her a picture of me sleeping with a cloud bubble of me and my parents colored in sunshine yellow. Elle studied it for a moment. "When you're with her, it's easier to dream of your parents?" I make a motion with my hands. *So-so*. "Help me out here, Celestine."

I put the paper down and wrote to Elle:

"I like her because she keeps the nightmares away."

~

When therapy was over, I ran back out to the courtyard to look for Noémie, but she wasn't beneath the lemon tree. I circled back to our room but didn't see her there either. In the halls, I ran into the head matron. "Excusez-moi, Madame, have you seen Noémie?"

Madame paused for a moment. This was the first time I'd spoken to her. "Oui. I was just coming to collect you. Noémie's with the Arnettes."

"The Arnettes?" I repeated.

"Her adoption was finalized last month. The Arnettes came to take her home today. They can't stay long. But she insisted on seeing you before they go."

My hands became moist with sweat with every step I took. In the corridor by the staircase, a suitcase sat by the door. The more steps I took, the clearer the picture in front of me became. If it weren't for her locs and signature boots, I almost wouldn't recognize her. There, Noémie stood, wearing a brand new, plaid-less skirt and top to match. She turned, and we locked eyes. For some time, neither one of us spoke. There were a million things I wanted to say to her, but none of them felt right. Maybe she felt the same.

"Hey." She said, finally.

"Hey," I replied. A long silence passed between us. "Nice outfit," I added.

She looked down at herself and rolled her eyes. "It's not my style, but Madame and Monsieur Arnette insisted. I didn't want to offend them."

"I get it," I said and shifted my weight from one foot to the other. Noémie crossed her arms. "Celestine," she started, but I couldn't hold it in anymore. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know how. I wanted to; believe me."

"Believe you? You had five months!"

“I know. I’m sorry. I should have told you sooner.” Her coffee-brown eyes bore into mine, and now I was the one breaking eye contact. “When did they start visiting you?”

“Maybe...three months before you showed up.” I scoffed. Eight months. How do you not mention that the same family has been coming to see you for eight months? “Do you hate me?”

“I don’t *hate* you, I just...don’t understand.” A whirlwind of emotions tore through me. I was disappointed, no, *angry*, at her secrecy. There’s no faster way to lose attraction than to see someone’s actions and words are incongruent. Yet within that burning anger, I felt blue, because I knew what her adoption would mean for me. For *us*.

I gulped the lump down that was bobbing in my throat. Noémie waited for me to finish my sentence, but when I didn’t, her shoulders slumped and she turned her body away from me. She unzipped the top pocket of her suitcase. Her soft hands grabbed mine and pressed a bottle of black polish into my palm. “We’ll meet again someday. And until then, keep this in your memory box so you’ll always have a piece of me.”

I looked at her as my fingers closed on the cool glass bottle. She kissed both of my cheeks and grabbed her suitcase. With a sad smile, she turned to leave, but I reached out and grabbed her wrist before she could walk away from me. Before the pain of it all could dawn on me. And then I asked the impossible.

“Don’t go.”

Noémie didn’t turn around, but I saw her head dip from behind. “What if this is my only chance at having parents?” My eyes became a cliff of snow, threatening to avalanche, and when I blinked, the white walls of the corridors that held Noémie at their center softened into the walls of the therapist’s room. I saw Elle’s mouth move. But it wasn’t her words I heard; it was

Noémie's: *"People come and go. But if I put them in my memory box, it's like they don't leave all the way."*

When I opened my eyes again, a single tear streamed down my cheek. I did the only thing I could do and took off my father's baseball cap.

"What are you doing?" Noémie asked.

"You're right. Maybe this is your chance. And if it is... I want you to have this."

"I can't take that. It's-"

"-Okay. I don't even like baseball." I joked, only she didn't laugh. I held the hat out to her. "Please. Just take it. To remember me by." Noémie pursed her lips, then gave in, taking a piece of me with her.

"I'm glad I met you, Celestine," Noémie leaned in to kiss me. Our lips met, wet with tears, salty and sweet. Then, she disappeared into her new life with her new family, without me.

That night, the nightmares returned.

~

December 7, 2010

Celestine

The Arnettes moved to a town called Menton near the Italian border. Noémie told me how much she loved Menton, how blue and beautiful the beaches were, and how the Arnettes (both working in hospitality) spoiled her with attention.

June 26, 2011

Another letter came in the mail from Noémie. She overheard the Arnettes planning another move, this time across the border to manage a hotel in Italy. She said Menton felt like home, and she was going to try to convince them to stay.

August 19, 2011

Her parents finalized the move. Noémie was now living in a town called Apricale. So far, she hated it. The town was too small, too quiet, and too far from the sea. I spent hours writing back to her and handed my letter off to Madame to send. I eagerly waited for Noémie's. Weeks flew by before I heard anything. I approached the Madame every day to ask if Noémie's letter had arrived, and every day she said the same thing: "Have patience."

On the 30th day of September, Madame Eloise confessed that the Arnettes moved around so much she couldn't pinpoint their current mailing address, and neither Noémie nor I had cellphones or an email yet. I still wrote to her and mailed the letters to Apricale (and sometimes Menton), giving her updates about life in the l'enfance and my therapy sessions, but as much as I wrote, I could never write out my feelings to her.

~

July 3, 2025

Calypso

By December 2012, two years after Noémie left, I was taken by an American couple named Catherine and Frank Samuels. After months of paperwork and even more months of waiting, I was adopted through what the French system calls an adoption plénière—a full and irrevocable adoption that gave me their name, their home, and a place in their world.

The Samuels lived in Nice for three years before moving to Tampa, Florida. In two years, I found myself with a new house, a new family, and a new identity. Celestine Moreau was no more. “You’ll be Calypso now,” Catherine had said gently, pressing the name into my chest like a badge I hadn’t earned. I repeated it aloud, but it sounded foreign on my tongue. I thought about correcting her, but I remember frowning, even nodding, standing idly by while Celestine quietly faded into the background.

In the summers, Calypso took ESOL classes to learn English. The better her English, the less French she used. When she graduated from FIU, she wrote English literature under the pen name *Calypso M*. The *M* short for *Moreau*. After fourteen years of speaking their language and wearing their customs, Calypso had fully assimilated into American culture. And Celestine was nothing more than a ghost.

~

July 4, 2025

Calypso

When I turned 21, my adoptive parents said my twenties would be the years I’d bloom. As if once I entered this new decade of my life, a new version of Calypso would be born. I can’t say I didn’t try to change, but it was hard to “bloom” when I wasn’t sure who they wanted me to bloom into. Catherine and Frank were kind to me. It’s not that I didn’t like them, but sometimes their kindness felt like a script I didn’t know the lines to. Catherine was a caterer who baked for a living. Frank did contractual work. His knuckles were scarred from years of welding before he traded in his torch for work as an electrician. Their parenting style was gentle yet distant, like they were waiting for me to walk toward them instead of meeting me halfway. We lived under the same roof, but oftentimes it felt like we were just tenants in each other’s lives.

~

July 7, 2025

After meeting with my editor, I drove home without music. Wanting, needing, to sink into myself. I didn't realize where I was headed until I was standing in front of the closet. On the top shelf sat two wooden boxes. Genesis 2010. The beginning of everything, and my unnamed latest time capsule. Catherine and Frank had it engraved for me. "C" for "Calypso" was carved faintly into its side. My fingers found the box, I borrowed a small paring knife from the kitchen drawer and brought it to the balcony. I paused, analyzing. There was space beneath the old "C." I began carving. Slowly. One letter at a time.

I sat back and admired my handiwork: "CELESTINE." Two identities on parallel planes now one. I opened the box. Inside, the past waited patiently. I opened my journal and picked up my pen. Despite myself, my hand trembled, not with fear, but with something harder to name. I took a second to steady myself, then clicked my pen, writing...

To: Noémie.

Some days I wonder if I dreamed you. If Nice ever happened. If the person you thought I was ever existed.

But then I see a lemon tree. Or hear rain. And think of you.

Somewhere, across the ocean, you're still out there.

I don't have your address, email, or even a phone number, but with this letter, at least now, I'll finally be able to say the one thing I never got to.

Thank you.

For the music, the rain. For seeing me when I was invisible.

For being my first love.

Wherever you are and wherever I go, I'll always carry you with me.

I kiss the page, fold it in half, and tuck it into an envelope, addressing it to the last known address I had from her. Then I lick the seal –the signature of Celestine coming to the light.

~

September 30, 2025

Celestine

Rain softly fell as I ran inside my apartment complex. Wet and sore, I stopped short at my mailbox. I haven't checked in a while. The metal tin box creaked open. It was filled with envelopes. One by one, I collected them: bills, credit cards, a speeding ticket, and then... wedged in the back was a letter from a ghost.