

The Dream of Paris

“In an old house in Paris that was covered in vines lived twelve little girls in two straight lines.” Sitting next to me underneath a blanket in my living room, my grandmother read to me. Her velvety voice carried on: “They left the house at half-past-nine, in rain or shine. The smallest one was Madeline.”

My eyes drifted across the page, watching Madeline wander through the streets of Paris, her bright red locks peeking out beneath a delicate yellow hat. I listened intently to my grandmother; the words she spoke transported me to another world: a world where I, too, wore a polished yellow trench coat and hat, my feet pattering against French cobblestones. To a world where cafes, boutiques, and the Eiffel Tower waited patiently outside my bedroom window. To a world where the grief of a broken family disappeared and everything was fully, finally okay. When my grandmother flipped to the last page and spoke the final words, I immediately asked “Oh, read it again, pretty please?” And so she did.

When I was growing up, my grandmother was the first person I would call when I was upset. She received my call when I didn’t make it into the school play, when my best friend moved to a different state, and again when my parents wouldn’t stop fighting. Somehow, her voice, so soft and so soothing, made my problems melt away. At the end of our calls she would say, “We’ll go to Paris one day. Just like Madeline.”

Over the years, we spent hours upon hours talking about our trip to Paris. We planned every little detail, from the places we would visit — The Louvre, Notre-Dame, the Arc de Triomphe — to what we would wear. “You know,” my grandmother would say, “they wear a lot of black over there. And close-toed shoes. We’ll have to get you some of those.” Our words

glistened as we spoke, each sentence distracting us from the troubles of our separate lives, each sentence lightening our heavy hearts. From those early childhood days, all the way up to high school to high school, I was never quite sure if our trip to Paris was merely a dream, a lovely, momentary escape, or something that would actually meet reality.

One day, during my senior year of high school, my grandmother said to me, “Now, Madison, I want to tell you something very important.”

“What is it?” I asked into the telephone line.

“In an old house in Paris covered in vines lived twelve little girls in two straight lines.”

“What?” I scrunched my eyes, *is this some kind of strange riddle?*

“Don’t you remember those *Madeline* books I read to you as a kid?”

“Oh, right! What about them?”

“Well, your grandfather and I have saved up enough money to take you and your brother on a trip to Europe,” she said, her voice overflowing with elation. “We’re going to London and Paris in the spring!”

My heart leaped. “Are you serious?”

“We leave at the end of May.”

I couldn’t contain myself. *Paris. We’re actually going to Paris.*

When springtime arrived, with cherry blossoms and freshly cut grass perfuming the air, a little box arrived on my front porch. Inside, a pair of dainty black oxfords, wrapped with pink ribbon, and a small note containing four short words: *For Paris. Love Grammy.* A few weeks later, packed and ready to depart, my grandparents drove from their house in West Virginia to our place in Chicago. Together, we rode to O’Hare, my grandmother reading our itinerary along

the way. Nearing the airport, excitement swelled in our bones and burst. As we reached our gate, we learned that our plane was delayed four hours, but we didn't care; we were going to Europe, and that's all that mattered.

We landed in London, our first stop on our European adventure. On our first evening, we went on a river cruise of the River Thames. With the soft trickling of the water beneath us and a slight breeze through our hair, our eyes met the bold, yet delicate contrast between old and new. Skyscrapers bumped up against aged stone — history colliding with modern charm. Quiet architecture and quaint streets bustling with businessmen, artists, and friends. Big Ben winked at us as we admired the artistry of his home. Throughout the next few days, my grandparents, brother, and I marveled at St. Paul's Cathedral, witnessed the breathtaking refinement of Windsor Castle, and even saw the Queen's chariot, drawn by four white horses. Each day, we found new elegance and grace intertwined with the buzzing thrill of adventure. We inhaled the spirit of the city, and that same energy surged inside of our hearts. We were here, together, and everything was perfect.

Or so we thought.

On our last day in the city, we visited the Tower of London to see the Crown Jewels. The expansive architecture of the Tower mystified us, its stiff stones looming over us while we waited in line. Once we entered the gates, we grabbed a map and began to plan our afternoon. "What do we want to see first?" my grandfather asked, smiling while putting his arm around me.

"The line for the Jewels seems pretty crowded right now. Let's wait a little bit for that." my brother said.

"Okay. We'll wait, any ideas, Maddy?" my grandfather handed me the map.

“Let’s see, we could go to the Fortress, or the Torture Tower where they kept prisoners, maybe we’ll start with the White Tower. Grammy, what do you think?” I looked up at my grandmother. Her eyes met the vast distance of the clear blue sky, and even though she was standing right next to me, she somehow seemed miles away. I repeated my question, “What do you think, Grammy?”

My grandmother’s eyes shifted to me, “let’s, um...let’s,” she stuttered before mumbling something inaudibly.

“What?” I asked.

I watched as my grandmother tried to formulate phrases, her eyes wide and empty. Nonsense spurred from her mouth, her lips moving slightly out of sync. Time slowed, and for a second it lingered, motionless — the air freezing along with my grandmother’s speech. As she stood there struggling, I remembered her velvety voice, the one that read to me as a young girl: *they left the house at half-past-nine, in rain or shine. The youngest one was Madeline.* I remembered her soothing inflections, and hours of phone calls. I immediately felt terrified. My brother, grandfather, and I stared at her in silent stillness. *Is she having a stroke?*

Suddenly, my grandmother snapped out it. “Sorry, guys. I don’t know what happened there. I couldn’t think of the words I wanted to say. Yes, let’s go to the White Tower first.”

And like that, it was if nothing had happened. Those fearful seconds of silence disappeared into thin air.

In Paris, everything was perfect once more. I wore my black oxfords and heard my own feet pattering against French cobblestones, just as I had imagined years ago while listening to my grandmother read to me. Our time in Paris was just as much of a fantasy as those childhood tales.

Together, just as we had always dreamed, my grandmother and I visited a traditional French cafe, sipping hot chocolate and eating macaroons. We walked along the Seine, arms locked, adoring the dainty windowsills and detailed iron railings that lined the buildings. Notre-Dame struck us with absolute magnificence. The grandeur of architecture reflected the glory of the Lord; never before had I entered such a sacred place. In Montmartre, Paris' art district, my grandparents, brother, and I watched street artists create breathtaking paintings, each stroke more beautiful than the last. One artist stopped my grandmother on the street and asked to paint her, for she was so stunning. During our last evening, we sat, a glass of wine in hand, admiring the sparkling Eiffel Tower against a cotton candy sky. To the right of us, a young child illuminated the air with her giggling while riding on a decadent, pastel carousel. My grandmother and I stared out at the French city, with all of its charm and allure and she looked at me, her blue-green eyes radiating with love: "We made it to Paris. Just like we always said we would."

It was only after we came home that my brother and I learned my grandmother had suffered from a Transient Ischemic Attack, or mini stroke, while we were at the Tower of London. After returning from the trip, my grandmother visited her doctor and learned that she was perfectly healthy — he could not decipher what caused the mini-stroke. Hearing this news, my brother said to me "I had no idea that's what was going on. We're lucky it wasn't worse."

I didn't respond. Immediately, I thought back to those seconds of stillness at the Tower of London. *Is she having a stroke?* I remember thinking to myself. I knew what was happening, but I didn't say anything.

Why didn't I say anything?

Paris was my grandmother's and my place of escape, our place to turn to when everything else in life seemed too troublesome. At the Tower of London, perhaps I wasn't ready to face the cold and harsh facts of life. Not yet was I willing to grasp the delicate fragility of time and of love between a grandmother and her granddaughter. Perhaps that's why I couldn't manage to ask if she was okay, to ask aloud that frightening question. Perhaps my grandmother wasn't ready, either.

After the incident, we should have taken her to the hospital immediately. We should have canceled the rest of the trip. But we didn't. Instead, we carried on. We escaped unrest once more to live and breathe *le rêve de Paris*. The dream of Paris. Even now, older and more equipped to face the hardships of life, I know my grandmother and I will never completely succumb to the grief of reality and we will never, ever stop dreaming of Paris.