

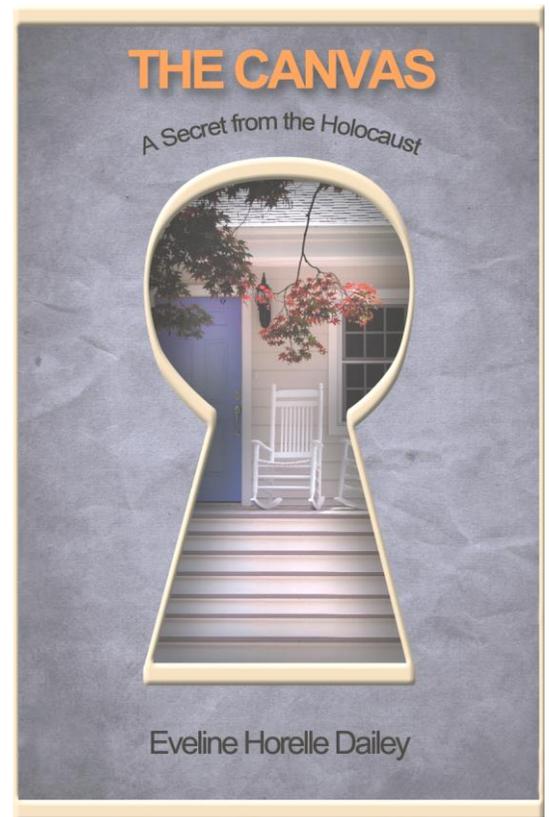
## The Canvas – First Three Chapters

### **I Have A Tattoo**

I woke up ready to face the world. A chat with my parents about the virtues of being twenty-one did not set me free, but my long awaited gift, the key to which was in my hand was a good omen. I still did not have a car to drive but I was twenty-one!

I decided to visit Suzannah; she was my shadow, my friend, nanny when I was young and confidant now that I was much older. As far back as I could remember she had always been there for me. A thousand times she said I was a blank canvas being caressed with impressions, footprints and mirages left behind by others. I have begun to understand what she meant, but no longer do I see myself as that blank canvas. Today bold colors add interest to its surface. The canvas continually changes as new brushes stroke its surface.

I had reached my majority and that was accomplishment enough! This birthday promised to be more special than anything I had ever dreamed of. The key was the assurance for the car I had been waiting for. The night before, with a group of new friends I visited a tattoo salon and treated myself. The owner was from China, I think the only one in town; he was a good artist. Wearing my brand new pair of American jeans, the black top I wore when I was fourteen but with the straps cut off, I was ready to greet the world. Strapless was my style at twenty-one — with brilliant red lips and a head full of black curls. I left my parents satisfied with my gift but I still had to wait another three hours for delivery of my car. One quick look in the dining room mirror, I saw perfection. I had to spread the news!



Crossing the long eggshell-colored veranda flanked by tall columns, and cypresses on one side, I entered my mother's garden. The lavender scent was almost intoxicating. A few more steps and a new fragrance enveloped me, a subtle aroma of yellow irises. They were from Spain where last season Maman had purchased the bulbs. They were in full bloom for my birthday! She brought back more bulbs and cuttings every time she travelled. The garden was her love, and everyone enjoyed it. Around the corner, I entered the stone pathway leading to Suzannah's cottage. Painted an eggshell white like the main house, it had no semblance to the stately Hacienda Blanca, as mother referred to it. The cottage was very small but the same type of red clay tiles gave both roofs their Mediterranean appearance. A curve on the path, and the aroma of the yellow flowers changed. Suddenly, I was assaulted by the chemical odor of turpentine. A craftsman had just repainted Suzannah's front door after two days of sanding. The mix of Prussian and Aegean blue revealed veins within the wood I had not seen before. Perhaps at twenty-one I was becoming more aware of my surroundings. One more step and cautiously I turned the old brass knob.

Suzannah never paid attention to what I may have been doing; she just talked to me. "Since people hold the colors splashing around you, be careful because without malice or sometimes with plenty of malevolence, the colors they carry will splash you. Be mindful, Julienne, the colors are indelible. Better learn this now while you can. Twenty-one is a special time of life."

Thinking about this day brought the glowing feelings of a prior November morning a long time past. It was a few days before the assassination of the American President, John F. Kennedy, and seeing it all again in my mind's eye resulted in other realizations. The flowers, the terrazzo floor of the veranda and the almost pink flat rocks of the pathway to Suzannah's cottage belonged to another family these days. Reliving this significant period while in my new home in

New England, and sitting on the porch with the two rockers, is creating the texture I could not palpate before then.

“Look Suzannah, it is my birthday! I am twenty-one years old! I have attained my majority, and I am still in one piece. I am an adult now! I will bet you never thought I would live this long! Guess what! I have a key to a car and, I have a tattoo!” I took a long breath, waiting, waiting for a reaction.

I had just finished reading two books. The first was Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse*; I found the book interesting because Sagan’s protagonist must have known first-hand about missing the mother she lost at age two. I related to her because Maman and I were always at odds. She was a disciplinarian and I wanted freedom. She wanted a perfected version of me. It was important to Maman. “I will see to it that you act and behave perfectly.” What I missed always was a mother who was accepting of me as I was. There was a safe arms length between us.

In books from her library I found notes from my father to her; he loved her very much I think. There were pieces of papers, old family photos and so on. Maman used anything as a bookmark. It was always a treat to find these things. When I was reading Sagan I found part of a telegram, yellow and torn and it said, — daughter STOP arriving STOP — I could not read the rest. Whose daughter? Arriving where? There was something about this particular note that bothered me. When I asked Maman about it, since my latest reading list did not meet with her approval, she never answered. She wanted to control what I read, who my friends were, who I talked to. Maman was difficult to say the least. The other book I read was, *Madame de Bovary* written by Gustave Flaubert, who had nothing but scandalous thoughts in his head. Great book! One day, I could be an exciting Madame de Bovary, something that would bring snow in the South of France and most assuredly the death of my mother. She felt these books were not

appropriate for a young girl. She probably would have preferred if I continually read books she read to me when I was five. When I told her these books came from her library the discussion ended. We never again talked about what books I read, or their authors. It was not the time to be asked about ‘daughter — arriving’. Besides, she dismissed me as she often did. I had gotten used to it but was never happy about it.

Twenty-one, so far ahead of my time! I had read literature, a few seedy books and now I had a tattoo. I had arrived!

I am amazed how sitting in a rocking chair on a porch in Maine can trigger such memories. Nothing looks or feels the same as it did when I was twenty-one, yet I am remembering. Trying perhaps to understand what Suzannah said. Attempting to understand why Maman wanted me to be not who I was but some version of her I think.

The French Riviera was at its best this fall of my birthday. A glorious day lay ahead to celebrate my birth! I was elated! The coastal town of Toulon where we resided was readying itself for the Nouveau Beaujolais delivered that very morning, no doubt in celebration of my birthday, the best day in November. The fourteenth, of course, when even the wine takes part in the celebration! How naïve I was to believe that these things happened in a country because I was born. A shipment of fish and mollusk had arrived from Marseilles; my father thought they were the finest fruit of the sea to be found in the whole of France. Our cook was busy with preparations for this evening. At the bakery, Saint-Jean, an enormous cake was being made just for me. My parents had invited guests from the world over; people my father had met and became friends with or did business with were invited for this event. The guests were well connected and according to Suzannah my father was an important man. To me, he was my Papa. I remember my mother crossing names off from the list I furnished her. Many of my friends were not appropriate, she said, her favorite terms for as long as I could remember.

My grin was broader than usual, showing off my brilliant smile. My old porcelain doll, a permanent fixture sitting between the two square pillows on my bed was no longer needed. Yet, it was not easy to give it to the servant to dispose of. Adeline was the doll's name. For years she sat on my bed, wearing her blue dress and black shoes. She too had curly hair but hers was blond. I no longer remember who gave me this doll but my concern this particular November 14 was not a doll but my jet-black hair, wild with curls. The hairdo of the day took hours to perfect. I used water and lots of sugar made into a syrupy substance to keep each curl in place. Susannah often used this concoction in my hair; she insisted it made my hair shine. Maman did not have the patience to ever comb my hair. I looked great I thought, my hair partially covering the right side of my face to give me an air of sophistication only a person of my age could understand and appreciate. My head was ever so slightly cocked to the left exactly as practiced in front of the mirror for hours, a technique developed to stress my aquiline nose. A perfect shadow of myself was cast on the wall next to the blue door. I was beaming while wearing the American jeans purchased a few weeks before at a boutique in Paris. I was in fashion and eagerly awaiting Suzannah's reaction. I still remember the wait; perhaps two minutes that seemed like hours. "Suzannah, I have a tattoo." Perhaps she had not heard me the first time.

This happened decades ago and now on this long porch, watching the harbor from my new property in New England, I can remember every detail although I am no longer twenty-one. Today is November 14, 1979 and at thirty-seven I am a widow. It is my birthday. I miss Suzannah, I miss Frank and I still question why I felt Maman envied my relation with Suzannah who was simply more accepting of me.

## **To My New Home**

No one is ever prepared for death. I had heard these words many times before, and while I had experienced death around me, what I felt now made it all meaningless. The magic I once touched with my bare soul and body is now a series of memories wrapped in a cloak of passion, laughter and sorrow. These days, I am allowing life to take me where it will. Time has gone by. I have not succumbed to fear but while in the process of experiencing this great love, immersed in life's fleeting moments I had not prepared my self for a life lived on its own terms. Frank did that well and his essence is teaching me about life's engagements. Something radiates within me whenever I think of this man!

He was born in Massachusetts and promised me we would visit and perhaps move to the United States after his retirement from his post at the Sorbonne where he taught American Literature. He was fifty-seven when we married. A simple ceremony with friends and my

mother in attendance was all we needed to become husband and wife. We had a great dinner at home, compliments of his student body. Our little apartment was bursting with pure bliss. Mother did not understand this American in Paris, but she liked him nonetheless. Perhaps his age and position had something to do with it. She thought he would harness the wild side of me. When she arrived in Paris, two days before the wedding, she was surprisingly casual in her approach. “Now Julienne, this man is appropriate for you. He seems stable though he must be a bit of a Bohemian. Why did he leave his own country to come to Paris?”

Had the two met, my father would have said he was a man of character and I think they would have liked one another. Suzannah would have insinuated that she was pleased. She would add, I was adding the colors my canvas needed and this man in my life had a good brush.

My sorrows no longer paralyzed me, the experience was sublime, and I grew to understand better what life was all about though I still had plenty of unanswered questions. I was mentally revisiting our residence in Paris; the apartment on the third floor from the side entrance of a magnificent bookstore called the Librarie Frost where we met. Among others they sold books by American writers and poets in their translated versions.

I was at a reading area of the library with volumes of Emily Dickinson, e.e. Cummings, Robert Frost, Edgar Allan Poe; American authors translated to French which I hoped to read before taking a class. This charming man walked up to me. When I looked at him I noticed his eyes were neither green nor blue, but more an amber color, I thought of the eye colors many people of Afghanistan seem to have. He coughed, and stepped closer. He wore beige corduroy trousers and his shirt woven in a pencil-striped pattern was deep green. His jacket was a camel hair color and looked Italian; it proved to be a perfect fit on his six-foot plus frame. This man had shoulders I could rest my head against.

“My name is Frank Fairchild,” he said. “I see you have selected authors from where I was born. May I join you?” He did not give me time to reply as he picked up the books I had placed on the seat next to me. He sat down holding my books on his lap. “Do you like the New England area or is it American writers and poets you like?”

No need for formalities here, “My name is Julienne Duprée.” I told him. “I have never been to New England and I have never read an American writer but I am about to sign up for a class at the Sorbonne where I intend to study American Literature.”

He smiled in a way that strongly attracted me. “This is your lucky day, Mademoiselle, because I will be your instructor.”

Without giving me notice, he put the books on an empty table next to a bookshelf, produced a piece of paper from his jacket and scribbled something I could not read. Placing the paper on top of my pile of books, he offered me his hand. I took it without a thought and he escorted me out of the store.

Keeping pace with him, and feeling rather good, I was comfortable on his arm. For a while we did not say a word; I think we were both trying to understand what we were feeling.

We walked the three blocks to the Sorbonne, where I registered and then we continued to a café. Over café au lait and a brioche, we continued our now lively conversation that did not stop until his last day. We had four days together before classes began. I still smile and feel a vague stirring when I summon these memories. Every establishment of the Latin Quarter was, according to Frank the most unique place he had ever seen.

Each open door gave us reason to stop. Frank also seemed to have known every merchant, every café and talked to every passerby. He was different from anyone I had ever met,

and also older. It was late in the day when he suggested we should go to my apartment pick up a change of clothes. We had a few days before classes and we were going to be together.

Somehow, this man, without effort, managed to whisk me off without disturbing a feather. I was bound to a place I did not know. I cannot say the winds of love blew under my wings; it was not love at first sight although it held a hint of destiny. We became friends in an instant, lovers in less than twelve hours, husband and wife in less than thirty days.

This is how my journey to America began. My beloved Frank did not accompany me; instead, he succumbed to lung cancer. The vibrancy of life this man exhibited with me, his students and others, did not suffice to combat this lethal opponent. I was left with memories of him in our little apartment, and the key to a home he had purchased in New England in a town called Bar Harbor in Maine. That key summonsed feelings I had when I got my first car. Maman thought I was going to kill myself driving while I wanted wind on my face. From the map he showed me, and the stories he told me about the area I knew it would be different from Paris or any other place I had visited. Frank purchased this nest as he called it, after a real estate agent he knew mailed him two photographs. I never met this person, at least not yet. Getting to know Frank took no time at all and I understood why it did not take him long to become my husband. He told me stories about New England, its early beginning, the historical figures in America and their quest for freedom.

I learned about the climate but he did not tell me how frequently it changed. I could even visualize the people. Had he survived, it was where we hoped to move one day. Frank had no difficulties talking about life and death, reminding me often of the impermanency of things and life itself. "Julienne, we are born to die." This was something I did not care to hear.

While the cancer was ravaging his body, Frank asked me to continue with the classes at the Sorbonne. “Julienne, if you had not met me you would be in school opening your mind to new worlds, formulating and molding the new you. Do not stop going because I am in bed. Your repertoire of stories every day will bring me what I love. Do not deprive me.” Off to school I went, and everyday I had something new to report. I was not a great cook, so often I stopped and bought breads, cheeses and the salami he loved. He could no longer have a glass of wine or a cup of coffee. Instead, we drank various mineral waters, and ate lots of marmalades because his taste buds were affected by the medicines he took. Sweets were still acceptable. To this day, I still drink mineral water, but no longer do my lips touch marmalade.

I had been restless a while, thinking of things we could have done, the child I never had, Suzannah, Maman and Papa all no longer in my life, and now Frank. Unhappy about my existence as it was, I decided to move to the USA. This was a decision requiring deliberate thought. I was contemplating moving to a new continent, where I knew no one and did not speak the language well. I wanted to be where Frank had been.

A great amount of international documentation had to exchange hands between groups of lawyers before the home became officially and legally mine.

I felt I had unresolved abandonment issues in my life. I had to face my father's death. After dealing with this, it was my beloved Suzannah who left our home in the South of France for a place in the Dominican Republic where she had friends. The fact that mother had requested it did not matter to me. I felt betrayed by Maman and abandoned by Suzannah. A change of country and scenery would do me good. At times the decision terrified me but I also felt a pull toward this new adventure. The thought of experiencing America as Frank had would give strength to my memories of him. Personally experiencing the things he had told me about, like going to antique stores, bookstores, museums, and much more was important to me. I vowed to

walk the harbor with him in my heart. The desire to visit the places Frank had promised to take me was imperative to my recovery and growth. The journey into Frank's world would include the homes of American writers and the museums he loved in various cities and states. The idea was to spend a year travelling. After a period, I would settle and find something to do, perhaps teach French at the university. There was no immediate need to speculate; it was too early.

I no longer recall how long this voyage took. I had to ship to this new place all the things I had accumulated and now all treasures to me. This new address, however mysterious, was full of promise.

In Paris, all of my belongings were stored, and I was handling the family business affairs in Toulon. My mother had died suddenly of a stroke, and, in a way I am glad she left this world quickly. I was there that day, stoic as ever but she could not talk, it was only four months after Frank's death, and I was not ready for that. Selling the family home was essential to my recovery; I wanted no strings if a continental change was in the cards. I had no reasons to keep the house and there were no heirs. The last day there, in a surreal state, I walked through each room of Hacienda Blanca. The gardens were no longer magical and the place no longer held my heart. The glue that held my world together was gone.

It was a long voyage, from the Lyon Saint-Exupéry Airport then Orly in Paris to my final destination, the Bangor International Airport in the United States. I felt I had lost a year. I will probably always remember how eventful this journey was and how it changed my life. I came to realize I was not mentally prepared for the decision I had made. I was apprehensive, and the unknown did not hold the air of adventure it had before boarding an airplane. What I searched for did not seem to be at the end of a runway. There were two stops during this long voyage, one in London, with was a two-hour layover. During the long wait I gave some serious thought to going back home. Alas, I no longer had a home to go to in France. I boarded the plane to the

USA with mixed sentiments. Things were not what I wanted them to be. Loneliness was not the feeling I had anticipated when we first talked about going to the United States. The plane was filled to capacity, I was on edge, I could not read or sleep and after hours of torment, there was an unscheduled stop in Philadelphia because something was mechanically wrong with the plane. All passengers had to get off the plane and wait for the right connections. Had this been a New York stop, for certain I would have disembarked and spent a few days visiting Manhattan. During my three-hour wait, I roamed the airport's corridors. I attempted my first American hot dog. Frank had told me about ball games and eating these things. After the first bite I knew they would never become part of my diet. The corridors were wide enough and people were everywhere. The greater disturbance had to do with attempting to understand the rapid staccato of the various tongues. A diminutive store between a coffee shop and a small restaurant selling more hot dogs caught my eye. This is where I purchased a map of the USA and one of Maine. The map of Maine was yellow with age but contained the information I needed. Leaving the little store in a better mood, I found a corner where I could spread my map and my spot was not too far from my departure gate. The universe was good to me I thought, as I opened my aged map.

I concluded I would have about a two-hour drive to my home. Realizing this, I very nearly panicked. I was not feeling at home at the airport, I did not understand the signs and had to refer to my pocket dictionary in order to communicate. Driving alone in the middle of the night was not conducive to confidence.

After two hours had passed, we were informed it would take another hour. During this merciless wait I studied every square centimeter of the map.

We landed five hours late. Exhausted, I had to find transportation to take me to my address and this was problematic. The travel agent had taken care of everything, I thought, except the car rental. The agent was wonderful, showing me where I was on the map and where I

was going. A young porter, transporting my two suitcases, followed me like a young dog. I hoped with the aid of my road map I would find my home, much later than anticipated but at least I would find it. As I walked toward the cars I remembered I had to locate the telephone company to announce my arrival to someone. The telephone connection details had been handled by my agent in Paris, but I wanted to be certain communication would be available to me in my home. The young man with my luggage, pointed me to a series of public telephones. My billfold contained currency but no coins. Jack was the name on his tag, so I asked Jack if he would exchange some dollars for me. I do not think he understood my jargon, but, with a smile, he handed me a coin, telling me it was a quarter. Puzzled, I asked him a quarter of what? We had an incomprehensible exchange, and finally pulling out a few more coins out of his pocket he explained their denominations. "This one is a dime, there are ten of those to each dollar. Four like the quarter I gave you also made a dollar and, this one is called a penny. You do not want to pay anything with pennies because it takes a hundred of them to make a dollar. Sorry I do not have a nickel." We both laughed when I told him I would hire him to become my banker and my English teacher. I think he understood me. I explained as best I could, I needed to call the telephone company and announce I had arrived and I wanted my telephone connected as soon as possible. Without hesitation, "Mam, they are closed now, you'll have to do this tomorrow."

The reasonable decision was to deal with the telephone matter in the morning. I had learned to cope with the death of my father, with missing Suzannah and I also missed my mother. Without Frank, I felt lost but I was fine. I could wait for the telephone.

Jack brought me back to reality. He pointed to my car. It was a black Chevrolet the size of Noah's ark. He put the suitcases in the trunk; it was about the size of our Paris kitchen. I gave Jack a kiss on each cheek which caused him to blush, but he recovered right away when I

gave him two twenty dollar bills. The exchange between Francs and Dollars was still a mystery to me.

Once in the car, with my maps open on the passenger seat, I began the drive without a clue as to how long it would take to find what Frank called *The Next*. On my map from the rental company I found US Route 1, but could not see where Owl's Head was. It was in this miniscule locality I would find the address, and recognize the house in the dark — a house I had only seen in an old and torn photo. For reasons I did not understand Frank did not have a full picture of this house. I knew he had the place painted eggshell white because I had told him stories about my childhood residence. I suspected he never thought of having pictures taken. The absent-minded professor! He did not get a chance to visit Toulon. He would have liked it there, and the chance to be here with me tonight was also not in the cards for us.

I kept on driving at a slow crawl. Looking for a house facing the harbor. Because of the time spent waiting to embark after the fiasco of mechanical problems, it was too dark to see much and I could not tell the colors of the houses I passed. They all faced the harbor, they all had trees behind and in front of them. Still none of the ones I could see had a porch or I could not see any thing resembling a porch anywhere. The harbor was barely visible. I was about to cross a bridge when I stopped to check the map. All was in order except how I felt. I was driving in the right direction, at least ten miles under the speed limit, which was unusual for me. Until this very night, I always thought driving was to be done at optimum speed. As a few lights appeared I looked for a freshly painted house I could not see. The torn picture with its long porch was my only clue. It was dark I was frustrated, scared and very tired. Suddenly, as if waking from a dream, I realized I would not be able to see my house because there would be no light on to illuminate it. Again I stopped, visually shaking this time, retracing my route and what I had

seen: driveways, names I could not read, nailed on trees trunks and poles, very few numbers on low signs. I took a deep breath; I had not yet passed one with our name, I was almost certain.

I was too tired to think but panic was setting in with each mile I drove, and I was totally exhausted. There were no streetlights, too few stars above and only a sliver of a moon. I had gone twenty-four hours without sleep. Tears now rolled down my face as I prayed for better night vision. At last, to the left and low to the ground, an illuminated sign became visible, possibly eggshell white, with dark numbers. The sign was framed in what could have been the deepest blue my eyes could distinguish, I read *Fairchild*. I stopped the car and this time my tears were tears of joy. I had made it to my new home in America!

I still can recall the fear and the sorrow I experienced that night. I felt completely spent and wondered how my friend Suzannah could have survived her journey through life. I continue to taste the joy I felt when I saw the bold FAIRCHILD. The appearance of a simple sign within my line of vision had changed something within but I was still crying and I was still petrified.

### **The House in Maine**

It was after two in the morning when I noticed the sign. In order to drive through, I had to open a wooden gate held by two rather large columns. It was dark, and I decided not to close the

gate. If there was a fence I could not see it. Aside from my headlights there was no light. I could see as far as the beam would illuminate and no further. I drove what I now know were only minutes. Even so, with every turn of my wheels the elements of doubt mixed with other feelings made the curved driveway seemingly endless. I had to believe I was on the right path going to the right house; it said so on the sign. My mind knew the name and the address, my hands were sweating and I could feel tremors up and down my spine. There was also something ethereal and frightening about being in total darkness. I had never experienced anything of the kind. Not knowing what I would find, I could now feel my accelerating heart about to jump out of my chest.

I drove slower than when I was looking for the address. At one point a motion detector light came on. A miracle! I may have been holding my breath because with the light came a deep exhalation. I could see a white house, and a porch that seemed suspended. My headlights had already traced a circular driveway. I did not see a garage. I parked the car several feet away from the steps leading to the porch. The front door was blue. Somehow I could tell. I had to climb stairs with my large suitcases. I took the key out of my purse and began the climb, up one, stop, up two, three, stop catch a breath or two, up four, stop, five, six stop again and seven. The smaller of the two large suitcases had made it up the seven steps, I felt accomplished. Key in hand, I opened the front door. I was home in America.

Frank must have retained every detail of every conversation we had, the front door was painted a Prussian blue with a hint of the brilliance of the Aegean blue. I paused a long while. The wall switch washed the front room with light. It was too small to be called a living room, it contained two blue chairs much like the ones Suzannah had. There was a table between them, a lamp on the table, and a picture of us by the River Seine. On the other side of the room, there were two rocking chairs. I imagined this room as a reading room and with the table lamp on, I

could appreciate that the chairs were covered with a fabric almost identical to Suzannah's blue chairs. Somehow Frank heard my descriptions and details. He was a conversationalist but he listened well. It was evident the two rocking chairs belonged on the porch. I turned another switch on, and this brought light to the porch. I dragged one rocker out, looked where my eyes could see. I dragged the other rocking chair out and then I sat down. I had so much to digest, all the while trying to understand how I felt. This was a moment filled with every imaginable emotion. A year has passed and I still can summons details of my arrival. It was a moment in time when I was both scared and proud of my accomplishment. I had conquered fear and found my new home. Suddenly, I felt cold. There was a slight breeze and it disturbed my dream. The remaining suitcase would not float out of the car. I had to go get it. Seven steps with a large suitcase, was like climbing Mt. Everest.

I was able to examine what I called the reading room. On the interesting table was a Tiffany lamp with a peacock design glass shade, the picture Frank must have sent to someone to put there. My two enormous suitcases were on the other side of the room. There were no pictures on the white wall.

I closed the front door, not sure if I had locked the car, but I did not care. I was too tired to be afraid or concerned.

I sat down and noticed the empty shelves. Instantly I knew every book Frank had in the apartment and some of mine would fit in their new home. Little things were giving me great pleasure including almost three walls with bookshelves. My exhaustion gave way to another feeling; I was hungry and thirsty too. I got up and headed for what I thought would be the kitchen. I found the living room and the dining room. Both were small rooms furnished with the bare essentials. Frank knew if I lived somewhere I had to give it my own identity as I had done to our apartment in Paris.

On the dining table, circa late 1800, was an envelope addressed to me in Frank's handwriting. I pulled out one of the two Queen Anne styled chair and sat down to read.

*My very dear Julienne,*

*When I purchased this house many years ago my thought was to share it with someone special to me when I returned to the United States. You came into my life and so did cancer. If you are reading this note it is because I did not make the trip with you. I attempted as best I could to have a few pieces of furniture purchased in styles similar to those you described in your home and Suzannah's guesthouse. Sweetheart, you should have shown me pictures.*

*I so wanted to be with you the first time you saw the house. I am with you in spirit. My darling, know that I can live in your heart and memories. I loved you from the moment we met at the bookstore. Our life together was a short one but you made my last days worthwhile. I thank you for the gift of your love.*

*Since I did not know when you would visit the USA, I did not have fresh flowers for you on the table. I had two red roses put in the refrigerator by the man and his wife who will stop by when they realize you have arrived. His name is James and she is Jennifer Dillard. They have been very helpful and kind. The flowers in the fridge may no longer be alive but know they are a symbol of the love I experienced with you.*

*There are cans of sardines, and boxes of crackers and perhaps other things Jennifer bought. I know you must be tired, and perhaps perplexed but I think you are here because another part of your life will soon unfold. I will be with you along the way.*

*Welcome home sweetheart. Your loving husband*

*Frank.*

I did not know how I would survive the emotions I felt. Still hungry, I went to the kitchen. In the refrigerator I found the two roses, along with a bottle of mineral water, and in the freezer, a baguette. Three cans of sardines in olive oil from Portugal were on the counter. As always, Frank had thought about what I liked. I wondered about the man and woman he had mentioned. I saw no signs of life when driving in. As I broke off a piece of frozen bread, I wondered how they would know I had arrived since I did not have a telephone to call them.

The mixture of excitement and sorrow gave way to a new feeling — the awareness and the fact that I was exhausted and needed to sleep. Everything else would have to wait. I did not open a can of sardines but I had a piece of frozen bread and some Perrier. I thought of stories Suzannah had told about war and no food, the idea made my frozen bread taste better. Heading toward the hallway I saw three doors. I opened the first one, a room with an easel and chair facing a large window. I smiled, as I had told Frank I wanted to resume painting. My creative endeavors had stopped when Frank became too sick to take care of himself. I missed his hand touching my face. His eyes very pale toward the end could still bore into me. His voice, when not expected could still say something to make me laugh. “Laughter, Sweetheart, you must always have plenty of that.” I missed his voice. He was not there and we could not discover anything together. Alone, I walked to the second door. A bathroom with a tub with clawed feet stood still; the walls were pale green. The other door led to yet another bedroom, that one contained no furniture but a picture I think of the harbor. The house was larger than I had imagined. The hallway turned and led me to another door, this time it was my room with a very large window facing what appeared to have been a garden. It was too dark to tell. There were two other doors left unexplored as I tried to look out. One door was an adjoining bathroom; I

felt privileged. This area of the house was neither blue nor green, but rather a sage color applied not with a brush but a sponge. I could tell the walls were once white. I liked the finish, a bit amateurish, but done with care. I wondered if Frank had something to do with the finish. I had a wall in Paris with similar colors and finish. I would make a point of asking James and Jennifer when I met them. As care takers they would know these things.

I turned and on the bed that was not made I saw two square pillows and them between, a porcelain doll. She looked similar to the one on my bed for twenty-one years. Without undressing or looking anywhere for sheets, I sat on the bed and held my doll. I must have I cried myself to sleep. There was a knock on the door. I saw no clock nor did I have my watch on, it was daylight. In my poor English, I asked who it was, and a female voice answered “Jennifer and James” I asked them to wait. The woman sounded pleasant and happy and the man said nothing.

After splashing cold water on my face to wake me up, I shook my head, fluffed my curls, and looked at myself into the mirror I had not noticed the night before. I was relieved to see that my dress did not look slept in. I walked down the hall to the library, it was more than a reading room. I opened the front door for my first guests.

The couple knew there was no coffee; they brought me coffee and cream in a paper cup, bread with cinnamon and raisin, it was already sliced and I had never seen this type of bread. I smiled, and thanked them as I reminded myself I was in a foreign country and everything including the food would be different. There was also butter and a quarter wheel of Brie in this care package. I almost felt at home. They gave me a wonderful bouquet of wild flowers. Jennifer told me they came from the backyard. She was talking about the garden I could not see from the master bedroom. I made a mental note to explore this garden later on. I told my new friends I had a great deal to discover, including some sort of a vase. James dashed out and came back with one they had forgotten in their car.

Sensing I needed time to get my bearings, they did not linger. The wife, Jennifer, was younger than I was, a petite blond with blue eyes. She wore Jeans and a T-shirt. I was not accustomed to seeing women in T-shirts with a strange design on the back. It looked washed out but it was not an old T-shirt. Her husband was average height and he, too, wore jeans also with a red plaid shirt. Frank had one of those; he called it his lumberjack shirt.

Jennifer offered me her condolences; this was a thoughtful gesture to which I did not know what to say. She took a step closer to me and gave me a piece of paper; she had written their last name Dillard. I now had a good telephone number; the one I traveled with had been changed. This reminded me I needed to handle this telephone business, when I told them James offered to take care of it for me.

Frank once told me Americans did not hug and kiss on both cheeks the way the French did. I made this discovery with Jack at the car rental place but this moment called for an accolade the way I was accustomed. They both stiffened up a bit as I kissed them, and left soon after. Much like me with the condolences perhaps, they did not know how to respond.

The coffee they brought me still warm was transferred to a porcelain cup I found in the kitchen cupboard. I went to sit on my porch, facing the harbor I could now see. The view was as different as anything else so far experienced. Eating a slice of American bread and Brie made in France, I made a mental note to put at least one table between the two rocking chairs; some plants close to the door would be nice too. For the moment I held my cup on my lap.

Many hours passed and I became aware of how peaceful I felt in my new surroundings. I was no longer crying. I think Frank knew this place would be good for me, he had hoped to be sitting beside me. For now, I needed to sort out my life and many unsettling things had to be resolved about Suzannah and also my mother. She once said my husband was so American. I

wondered if Jennifer and James were thinking, “She is so French.” I missed my family and my husband more than I realized. This was not a morning like any I ever had. I wished Maman could have seen my new home, perhaps she would have approved of it. I know she would have enjoyed the serenity and all the plants. Mostly, I could see myself on the porch with Suzannah. I was still angry with her because she had left our home without fighting my mother. I felt it was just too soon after my father had died but I had come to accept it. Frank suggested people did the best they could with the tools they had. Life had to go on. I was alive and had to get on with the business of being alive. I did that when I was younger and now I would use the tools I had and do the best I could. My intention was to find my place in this new society. I knew it would take time but I was determined to pursue my goal.

A shower in my new American bathroom gave me a whole new perspective on life. The bathroom even had a closet in it where I gratefully found towels. A newly constructed shower with interesting tiles probably from Italy gave this room a stately yet feminine air. I made a mental note to ask Jennifer what she knew about the tiles. The water was cold, very cold. I would ask James about changing this situation. There was also a modern and obviously new tub in this enormous room. After the cold shower I was very happy not to have thought of taking a bath. I guessed the tub with clawed feet in the other bathroom was old, but suited for the guest bathroom. It had a very clear mirror with a silver and gold colored frame. Perhaps one day I would paint something directly on the wall to frame the tub and complement the frame’s intricate design. I was glad to realize I was making plans to decorate my new home. My bathroom had a mirror the width of which reminded me of a man with open arms. A series of cabinets and a sink were on the other wall I turned to examine my tattoo; it had not changed. There was a small window with a lace curtain I knew I would remove, with no neighbor across, a forest behind the house, I wanted to see out without the benefit of lace.

