

Katherine Tracy

What Mama Said: A Child's Memoir

If that late September breeze could've scooped me into the sky, I would've let it. But the gusty wind pushed me further down the dirt road that led to the little French town not so far from home. I called for my little sister Audrey until I was out of breath. Maybe she was hiding from me. She liked to hide from me whenever I was out looking for her.

Daddy would be home from the base soon, and we would all sit down at the dinner table to eat supper like we did 'most every night. Mama always said that dinner was a sacred time, and the table was where we shared the adventures of our day; but sometimes, it was where Mama told us to behave.

That afternoon Daddy sent a messenger to our house to tell Mama to keep us inside because of the Communist's party. That's when Mama said, "Go find your sister—you are supposed to be keeping an eye on her." I still didn't understand why I had to go hunt for her just because the Communists were having a party. But, the last thing Mama had said was "Watch your sister."

Audrey was always doing stuff like that, disappearing, so that Mama would send me out looking for her. My sister was good at turning up in strange places and Mama would call her the adventurous child. Everyone said she was such a cute little girl, and I was the tall lanky kid with stringy blond hair. That's why Mama kept my hair cut in a pixie. During our first tour to France, my sister bit a soldier's toe on the airplane and everyone laughed. I thought it was kind of stupid and had no idea why everyone on the plane was laughing.

During my dad's second tour to France for the U.S. Army, I can honestly say that I learned about culture. It was during the time of President John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile crisis. Mama said it was a good time to leave the south. I had heard all those grown-up whispers about segregation and integration that lingered in the school hallways—big words that I didn't quite understand. And I always thought it was weird that whenever the alarm sounded we were herded underneath our desks and told to place

our hands over our heads. Sometimes we lined up single file and moved into the hallways and sat facing the wall. I guess they couldn't figure out what to do with us. But Mama said it was 'cause New Orleans is so close to Cuba.

We didn't have to do that in France. Instead, we stood in the lunch line at school on the army base listening to the Beatles sing "Love, love me, do" and "I wanna hold your hand".

We lived on the French economy, where Mama said we would get a good education by learning from another culture. We boiled our water and listened to American radio. All the kids played together. The color of our skin didn't matter, neither did it matter if we were American or French. We were all the same, and it was our differences that made us so special. That's what Mama said.

We were in our comfort zone and everyday was an adventure. Daddy and Mama were always loading up my sisters and me into our '57 Ford station wagon for long drives along the French countryside. Daddy drove for miles and miles just for fun. Mama said it was educational, even if Daddy took a six-pack along, but she usually took over the driving if he wanted another. We'd drive for hours and hours passing sunflower and lavender fields. We drove past French women beating their laundry on the rocks alongside rivers. We tromped through ruins from wars so my sisters and I could run up and down layers and layers of stone steps, pretending we were American princesses in a foreign land. We drove on the cobblestone streets that winded through little French towns where we looked into pastry shop windows decorated with loaves and loaves of fresh *baguettes*, catching whiffs of sweet French pastries. I watched flies swarm around whole raw chickens and beef that hung from the ceilings in *les boucheries*. Sometimes, we'd stop at the fruit and vegetable markets set up on the sidewalks and buy a basket of deep red, black cherries to eat along the way. It reminded me of the French Market alongside the Mississippi River in New Orleans. Once, we all got tummy aches after eating black cherries, and Daddy said it was because the French fertilized their gardens with human manure. I always thought manure just came from cows and horses, but it comes from people too.

Wish I was riding 'cross the countryside right now, instead of hunting for Audrey. I called for my little sister again, but she couldn't hear me or she wasn't listening to me.

We lived on the outskirts of a little French town called *La Rochefoucauld*, so I knew if I just kept walking, I'd finally make it into town. Sometimes, we'd ride our bikes just to the edge of town. Maybe Audrey rode her bike this way—I had no idea, but as usual, I was on a quest to find her. Mama said it was better if I just thought of it as a quest whenever I had to find Audrey, so I wouldn't be mad at her.

I wandered down that dirt road for a long time before I came upon a stone house crawling with ivy and tailored in bright green shutters. Behind the shiny green fence a little French woman stood stooped over cutting a bouquet of flowers from her garden. The house was at least one hundred years old, but the fence was new and freshly painted. Colors and smells that reminded me of Grandpa's farm in Iowa floated through the countryside. I thought about the last time I had walked with grandma through her flower garden. Most of grandma's flowers were taller than me.

I stopped in front of the gate and called for the Madame. "*Madame, je cherche ma soeur. Elle est une petite fille blonde. Elle a huit ans. Elle est une américaine.*" I told her I was looking for my sister, that she was a little eight-year-old blond girl and that she was American. We learned French at school, like a regular subject, so all of the American kids could speak French.

But she just smiled and shook her head no, so I said, "*Merci, Madame,*" and kept walking. Mama said it was polite to say words like thank you, yes ma'am, and no sir. My teacher Mrs. Britain said southern kids were polite, even if they didn't pronounce all their words correctly. She was a Yankee from up North; that's what Mama said.

I passed a stone barn that looked ancient to me—not at all like the red wooden barn that Grandpa had back in Iowa. Down the road a piece, a woman beat her cows with a stick to move them back to the barn. I cringed, thinking about the first time I milked a cow with my bare hands. It was bad enough pulling and squeezing a cow's tit just to squirt milk into a bucket. Mama said it was educational, but what bothered me was that smell of warm milk that seeped into my skin. No matter how much I scrubbed with soap

and water that day, I couldn't wash off that sweet smell of fresh milk. I could almost smell it as I walked down the road thinking about how much trouble I was going to be in if I couldn't find Audrey.

Mama always said, "Watch your sister." But Audrey wouldn't listen to anyone, especially me. Audrey thought she knew everything and she acted just as old as the person she was with at the time. She had this way of looking straight through you. That's what Mama said.

Mama didn't let me watch our baby sister Lois, even though I was eleven years old. She came outside only when Mama was outside. I guess that was because Audrey and I once pulled her arm out of the socket. Actually, I guess it was me because I was the oldest, and Mama said I should have known better. Audrey and I were fighting over who Lois was going to play with that day, so we both took an arm and tried to split her apart. That's what Momma said.

Now I was in trouble for losing Audrey.

I kept walking down the road calling out for my sister. "Audrey! Audrey!" Nothing but grape vineyards covered the land on both sides of the road. As far as I could see—the fields were loaded with green grapes that hung from green leafy vines that twisted around crooked sticks standing in the ground like midget-looking ghouls. I shivered and hurried down the road before I spotted the town up ahead. I wondered if Audrey had gone this far.

I could hear French voices up ahead. A crowd of people stood around with their eyes and ears glued to a man standing on a stage. As I moved closer I saw a group of *gendarmes* watching the man doing all the talking. They didn't notice me, so I moved through the crowd until I could get a better look at the man. I really didn't understand much of what he was saying, but he sounded so strong and sure of himself that I wanted to see his face.

The man wore a bright red band around his arm. He glanced down at me, and then looked out into the crowd and continued to speak in French. I had no idea what he was saying, catching bits and pieces of the language as I tried to figure out what the fuss was all about. I looked around at the faces in the crowd, and that's when I saw that all the red arm bands around the arms of the people who surrounded me. That's when I realized I

was standing in the middle of the Communist's party that Daddy talks about. Daddy had pointed out the Communist's party to us on some of our long educational drives. I kept thinking about what Daddy had said about the Communists—that they didn't like Americans because of our freedoms. But Mama said they had their own culture. One thing was for sure, they liked parties, because they were always having parties on the streets in France. I thought then that Audrey probably hadn't walked this far. It was then when I felt my body swept up in the crowd as we moved down the street. The people moved so quickly, I couldn't do anything but trot as fast as I could. It felt like I was trotting alongside a herd of horses. If I turned around, I would have surely been knocked to the ground, so I just kept moving with the crowd. I felt the warmth of the bodies all around me, and it was a bit scary because the Communist people were all adults and much bigger than me, and I couldn't see where we were going.

It was a while before the crowd slowed their pace, but we finally ended up on the grounds of a beautiful old castle. I love castles. Daddy was always taking us to see castles on our drives, but we had never been inside this one because it was always closed. Huge wooden doors laced with shiny iron fixtures were opened widely. I stood there watching all the Communist people go inside the darkness of the old castle. I thought everyone had gone into the castle when a woman behind me gently pushed me inside the door. The doorman said something in French to the lady, and he and another man pulled the doors closed. That was when he took a skeleton key out of his pocket and locked both doors. At this point, I didn't know what to do. I stood quite still, peering up at the French lady. She removed her black silk scarf and smiled down at me.

“Vite! Ma jeune fille, allez pour manger,” she said with a slight gesture of her hand against my shoulder. Her touch was quite soft and soothing.

Pour manger, I thought, yum, she must think I'm a Communist person and that I was invited to the party. It was getting close to supper time, and I was hungry. The hike through town had built up my appetite, and a little food would make me feel better. And since the doors were now locked, I did not have much of a choice. I would try to be as Communist as possible, so I thought maybe I should just keep my mouth shut. I had the sinking feeling that Audrey was nowhere around here.

Huge paintings decorated the walls inside the castle. The furniture was grand, like

the kind that kings and queens get to sit on. I knew this because my daddy had taken us to a museum in Paris. It was Mama's idea. She told Daddy he had to take us for our education.

As I gazed up at the painting of one of the French queens—it must have been a queen—she was so beautiful, the nice French lady took a hold of my hand and led me into a room where a beautiful chandelier sparkled above the longest table I had ever seen. Covered with a beautiful white linen cloth, the table was set with fine china and shiny forks and spoons and knives on both sides of the plates. Nothing like the ones we ate with at home. Our silverware had U.S. printed on the ends, and they weren't near as shiny. Daddy said it meant "us" as a family, but we all knew it really meant United States.

"Sit down, my child, I know that you are American, although I have no idea how you got here or for that matter, why, but eat, *manger*," the French lady whispered into my ear as she attempted to stroke my tangled blond hair. I felt somewhat relieved that I did not have to pretend I was a Communist person. Her English was just as good as mine, but she still had a French accent. It was then when I noticed the huge baskets of fruit and long *baguettes* on the table.

The man who had given the speech sat at the head of the table. He smiled and began pouring the wine, but stopped abruptly at me. He saw me eyeing the basket of fruit, and set the bottle of wine down on the table. "*Voulez-vous des fruits?*" he asked.

I looked over to the woman next to me and she winked at me, gesturing that I should accept his offer. I chose several pieces of fruit and placed them in my plate.

"*C'est bon!*" he responded with a jolly smile and passed the bottle of wine to the woman next to me. She poured some wine into her glass and passed it to the man sitting next to her. I looked at the other end of the table and more bottles were headed my way. I thought then that I must be at the real Communist's party that Mama and Daddy talk about.

It was then that the man at the head of the table motioned to a waiter standing nearby. A few minutes later, the waiter brought a sparkling bottle of French lemonade to me. The lemonade in France is nothing like ours. It tingles in your mouth. He popped the cork and filled my crystal wine glass with sparkling lemonade. I was so thirsty that I

swallowed it down in one gulp. I realized then that I had been rude, and I should be polite in a room full of strangers, especially if they are like Daddy said. But the man at the head of the table didn't seem to mind, and motioned for the waiter to pour me another glass. The waiter filled my glass again and left the bottle next to my plate. Not to be rude, I looked toward the man at the head of the table. That is when he stood up, raised his glass and made a toast. So I lifted my glass and toasted with everyone, and we all laughed.

Next came two waiters carrying plates loaded with tan, white, yellow, and orange cheese. The waiters served the people on both sides of the table. I crinkled my nose because the cheese had a strong smell, but it looked pretty, so I chose a few pieces and placed them in my plate. All the food looked so pretty in my plate. We laughed and ate cheese and fruit until they filled our bowls with soup. The lady next to me broke off a piece of fresh bread and gave it to me. I love French bread, especially with hunks of *chocolat*, which is the customary snack among French school kids. The next tray was filled with crackers and *escargots*—that's snails. They tasted a little strange, but it wasn't a bad taste, and besides they were cooked. I was getting pretty full but the main dish was yet to come—roast lamb. No way, could I get up to leave now. That would be just plain rude, and I was not a rude child. I ate everything in my plate, just like Mama always said, and it took everything I had to get the chocolate dessert down. I had no idea what they called it, but it was a cake filled with dark chocolate and fancy sweet sugar dripping along the sides. At this point, I loved the French Communist's party.

But of course, like Mama says, all good things come to an end. Dinner was over and I had to go home. I thought about the locked doors, but lucky for me the nice lady who had guided me through the castle offered me a ride home on the back of her bicycle. As we walked toward the trees where she had parked her bike, she removed her red arm band. She handed it to me and said, "*Voilà*, take it—*pour* uh a souvenir."

I held the red cloth in my hand, studying it for a few moments, then slipped it into my pocket. We rode off down the road toward my house as she pointed out where all of her friends lived. She told me that her name was Madame Ilene and that I was a sweet little girl as she dropped me off in front of my house. "*À toute à l'heure!*" she waved and rode away.

I walked through the door, wondering if Audrey had ever made it home, when my dad yelled out, "I was just getting ready to send the army out to look for you, Cathy. Go wash your hands and come sit down to eat."

I'm sure glad he didn't, 'cause I know the army wasn't invited, and I sure wasn't hungry, but I went to the bathroom and washed my hands, and then sat down at the table.

Audrey was sitting there, smiling like an angel. She always smiled like an angel.

"I see you made it home," I said, nudging her.

"Oh, Cathy, your sister is such a hit in the neighborhood. Daddy found her at the vineyard down the road stomping grapes," Mama said laughing along with Daddy. "She is so adventurous. She will never forget the day she stomped grapes to make wine!"

Mama said, still laughing. "Audrey's getting her education!"

"Yeah, while the whole base is on high alert, Audrey's out stomping grapes," Daddy said shaking his head.

We bowed our heads and Mama gave thanks to the Lord, but I peeked at Daddy, and then quickly closed my eyes and slid my hand into my pocket, touching the red cloth still in my pocket.

Then Mama put some fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy in our plates.

"Would you like a biscuit, Cathy?" Mama asked as she picked up the plate stacked with buttermilk biscuits.

"I don't think so, Mama, I'm not really that hungry."

"But you love biscuits, Cathy."

"I do, Mama, but I'm so full; I just had a feast at the Communist's party."

"Oh, Cathy, please don't tell stories like that at the supper table."