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Little Rebecca

(Taken from journals in the days of walking between Nasbinals and Le Soulie in France)

I am taking care of a little girl on this long walk. Her name is Little Rebecca. Today, 11:15 am on August 28th, we sit outside the old church in the village of Aubrac, midway between Nasbinals and St. Chely d'Aubrac, two other tiny medieval towns. Little Rebecca has been staring with wide brown eyes at the Aubrac cows all day—a special type of cow, they say—whimpering her way past a baby cow that has gotten loose with a distressed, protective mother two feet away. Then, later, a bull separated from his pasture standing in the middle of the path. She has gazed in wonder at a local old lady, out on a day hike, content somehow with the age of this valley and the limestone rocks dotting the hills; the crosses marking events now retired to history books; the rocks underneath that each symbolize the prayer of one pilgrim, waiting for somebody else to carry it even one cross closer to Santiago.

The old lady seems content, walking by herself all day on this path of old prayer, picking flowers and saying hello to a young hiker, gazing out across a valley that has become a friend to her in its palette of purple heather flowers, yellow wheat, and green grass. Little Rebecca does not yet see this valley as a friend. It feels too old, too saturated with the footsteps of those more pious, more sure in their travels, more worthy of a pilgrimage, than she. The others who came before must have known how to bear their bags more skillfully, how to ask their questions more gracefully, how to say 'thank you' to the moment and to this slight breeze with a clearer, more truly grateful mind. All day I have asked her, "are you listening?" in the hopes that she might just listen to the valley,

but after contemplative bursts of thirty seconds she continues her nervous chatter.

So here we are, slowing down and eating chocolate at the church in Aubrac. There is a slight breeze, and the entire sky is blue. It is cool out and we wear sweaters here in the shade of the stone arches. We look out at yet another perfect horizon of rolling pasture hills. Little Rebecca, four years old, has another fit of fear, wondering once again why it was necessary to cross the Atlantic.

There is a cute little toddler boy here in the churchyard in a blue sweater with two daddies. They are pointing at the swallows and saying to him "oiseau!" They lead him over to the Romanesque church door, where he stops and looks up in silence. We are all that little boy, standing bewildered at the church door five times our height, looking in at the mystery of darkness and echoes and unyielding stone walls, and consoling ourselves with the sound of swallows in the rafters and the weak yet somehow dependable light of the flickering prayer candles.

I am trying to show little Rebecca the birds in the rafters.

~

Hours later, we have arrived in St. Chely d'Aubrac, where we will spend the night. We are reunited with our friend Jacqueline from Nantes, a recently retired single mother of four grown children with a lavender sunbonnet, a pink floral scarf, a crown of short gray curls, and about five feet of stature. Yesterday, she had caught up to us, bounding over a marshy pasture at the end of a long day, one solitary human ready to connect with another. She stumbled her way through short conversations speaking English that she knew from high school. Still, she stayed with us until Nasbinals, pausing at the top of every hill. I think she could tell that I am having difficulty caring for Little

Rebecca. “It is good,” she said,... “to...*comment se dit, comment se dit*...to look...behind. Yes? To look behind and to say sank you, sank you.”

I part with her for a minute to drop my bag at the gite. It is not a gite, it turns out—it is a real splurge, all by accident. I had misheard the man’s price on the phone the day before. I am ready to scold Little Rebecca and march her to a cheaper gite, but we are both tired of speaking French and before I can do anything, she darts up the stairs to our room. Nothing can talk her, eleven years old, out of being a young French aristocrat. She throws herself down on the twin bed with the smooth white comforter, scrolls through television channels, opens and closes the shower curtain. As I try to atone for my gluttony, Little Rebecca spies on grandmothers in knit sweaters out the window.

Jacqueline walks us later to the edge of town, bringing her French Rother’s guide. We stop at an old stone bridge. She translates the important details. Every year here, she says, they take the cows across this bridge in a ceremonial procession to new pastures. Little Rebecca, ten years old, stands with her mouth hanging open, watching her class report about the Calling of the Cows in Switzerland come alive, in a slightly different place. She has always dreamed of coming to a town like those in the homeland of her Swiss aunt Helen. She wore berets long before they sold them at H&M, searched for cowbells on the cows in Tillamook on drives to the Oregon Coast, and escaped the recess gossip by retreating to the travel book section of the school library. “My little reader,” Mrs. Downing called her.

We eat dinner alone on a terrace of the restaurant below our hotel room. “We’re on an adventure,” she tells me. There is a slight drizzle of rain, and she can smell men down the street having a casual smoke. Little Rebecca, seven years old, smells it and

thinks of her Uncle Tom, a tireless smoker. I don't want to tell her that he had a stroke a year ago, and Grammie Lu died five months later. I just want her, for a second, to bring me back into Eden.

Little Rebecca, nineteen years old, asks me why I am not out there trying a cigarette too, smoking with the local guys. "Where's the adventure?" she asks. "Are you crazy? Do you have a death wish?" I practically scream at her. "What's not adventurous about a thousand mile journey?"

~

We wake up, happy for luxury but shaky from a night of analyzing every creak in the old and dark hotel. At breakfast, there is an espresso machine and an array of fresh fruits, yogurts, jams, and authentic pastries. Little Rebecca devours chocolate, clinks the silverware against the plate, and plays with the Wi-Fi connection, as we sprawl out into a long morning conversation with the sweetheart, Brendan, on the magical overseas phone app.

"I'm ready to rough it," I tell him as I watch mist gather outside the windows, feeling guilty about the luxury accommodation. Secretly, I just want to cuddle with him. But I tell Little Rebecca to toughen up—the comfort ends now. But she's already running outside, heedless of me.

And then we leave, excited to write, into some sprinkles of rain. Little Rebecca, four years old and jumper of puddles, leads. We zigzag through the narrow stone streets, humming as the rain seeps into our hair, listening to it hit against the plastic of the raincoat. I start noticing that the rain is pouring more fiercely. Over the next hill, I hear thunder. Suddenly my waterproof raincoat, the one from L.L. Bean that Daddy bought

Little Rebecca, twelve years old, doesn't feel waterproof anymore. "Just walk," I tell her. "It'll pass." We walk over yesterday's pilgrims' bridge and turn onto a route with the customary red and white stripe and into a dense forest. The rain has steadily increased. I put my hood up. It is deafening, and unrelenting. Little Rebecca, four years old and jumper of puddles, is whimpering. Within three minutes the path is a stream, and we have to straddle it, my quick-dry pants absorbing water from the bushes on the side. "Just walk," I grumble again to Little Rebecca.

Little Rebecca, six years old, hears a crash outside and runs downstairs. She thinks the air force planes from the mid-July Hillsboro Air Show have crashed into her forest. A jump, and she is on their bed. "Mommy! Daddy! The planes!"

"No, Rebecca," they say. "Just lightning and thunder." It can light a house on fire, they say, but not ours, because of the rod on the roof. It will not hurt us, because the lightning is too far. You count between the flash and the sound--one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi.

"Hear the rain, Rebecca? That means the storm is almost over." Lightning, seven seconds thunder. Lightning, five seconds, thunder. One misszzz,twomizzz, threemizzz! Do we keep walking now? little Rebecca shrieks. We pass into an even thicker stretch of forest. Lightning, two seconds, thunder. Lightningthunder! Little Rebecca screams. We immediately run one kilometer back to town, soaked.

"How dare you," I tell myself, Rebecca, twenty years old. "How dare you risk the life of Little Rebecca."

The rain does not stop its torrents. We run into an open café, quickly dropping the now-useless raincoat on a chair. Staring at me are two middle-aged friends, French, from

the gite two nights before. I act out my experience to them as they sit, dry, having wisely waited out the storm. I order a café au lait and wring out my pants. Some of my clothes inside my bag have gotten damp. I am a bad mother. I pull my cell phone out of my coat pocket to connect to Wi-Fi. Daddy, are you still awake? Daddy, I got my Mississippi wrong. Mommy, the storm didn't end after the rain. Mommy, wake up. I find the phone waterlogged and flickering a purple screen. It is my camera, my method of documentation, and my link to home, and I have lost it.

A two-year-old girl laughs with her grandfather, the man behind the counter, and smiles as her mother coos at her. The mother walks out the door with a laundry basket. The little girl runs to the open doorway and wails after her into the rain. She just stands there, in the doorway, and cries. I want to stand with her. My whole walk is Little Rebecca, standing in a doorway, stuck between.

I finish my café au lait, now cold, and still watch the water fill the gutters. “May I walk with you?” I say in broken French to the couple. They nod, and go back to mimicking the little girl's wailing. The woman, Marie, keeps giving me inquisitive, smiling glances. “Rebeccá,” she says, with a guttural R, “come and walk.”

We turn out again onto the stone streets, newly bundled and wrapped in plastic. Marie and her companion, whose name I never tried to learn—too much French—are sensible, middle aged pilgrims and have covered themselves with dark green rain ponchos. Little Rebecca thinks they look like turtles, carrying big lumpy homes on their backs. She smiles, and tries to explain to them the humor. “Tu es comment une tortue,” she says—you are like a turtle. They stare at her, either because they think she is absurd or because they do not understand her accent. Assuming the latter, Little Rebecca gives

them the “awkward turtle” gesture from Middle School as an elaboration, stacking one hand on the other, and wiggling a thumb off each side. “Tortue,” she motions, grinning. They are silent until they see the thumbs turning, then stare and laugh uncontrollably, making the motion to each other. “She thinks we walk like turtles!” they laugh, looking offended. Little Rebecca, mortified, tries to correct, motioning to the ponchos. They look at her, confused, and continue laughing. All day, as Little Rebecca bounds ahead, they yell up to her, and send her the turtle sign as they approach.

The pastures from yesterday have turned to dense, green, moss-filled forests opening onto tiny hilltop farms. Little Rebecca wants the beauty to end. She wants to arrive at the convent where she will stay tonight, cry to a nun, and stick her wet phone in a packet of rice. But Marie and the man expect to see her around each bend to give her the turtle sign, and they are strolling, sharing earphones to the same iPod and stopping every thirty feet as it falls out of one ear. At midday, they wander into a hamlet of four or five tiny farmhouses with a musty hut holding benches and a table of hot water and coffee and teabags for pilgrims. The floor is dirt, and the roof is thatched. “This looks like a place Mary would have wanted to give birth,” Little Rebecca whispers to me with her Sunday School voice. It’s also the place where I want to dry my socks in the noon sun that has finally appeared. We sit down and two chatty locals come to greet us. I cannot comprehend. Every few minutes somebody hands me a piece of chocolate or motions to where I can find a latrine. They look curiously at me and attempt to talk to me. Marie and her friend explain the few things they know about me, the young American. We dry our socks and eat our packed lunches, sliding coins into the donation box to drink flavorless yet hot Lipton tea.

The afternoon walk is filled with squeaky shoes and worry-filled gazes at the horizon, searching for the stone convent. Towards the end, Jacqueline catches up with us, giddy and walking with two giggling young French women. Jacqueline and I say goodbye to Marie and her friend and the two French ladies and turn up the busy road to the convent. "Attention!" Jacqueline shrieks at me every time I walk a foot into the road. I ask her how she did in the rain. "I walked later, and then I sang and walked with the women," she laughs. She asks me. I act out the lightning and running back to town, and show her my wet phone, ready to cry.

We find our beds at the convent, old cells, newly converted and renovated, from when the convent was filled with nuns. We share a room of two single beds and a bathroom. I take out my tablet, brought for writing, and send a confession email to my mother about the rain and the broken phone. I need a real mother. "Please don't be mad," I write to her.

I walk a half a kilometer into town with Jacqueline to buy some rice for the phone. We each get an éclair from a boulangerie and stroll through the cobblestoned downtown. Little Rebecca stares at all the stone houses, with their window boxes exploding red and pink blooms against what is now a blue sky. "I want to water window boxes for the rest of my life," she whispers to me, repeating a resolution we had made a few days before to insist on beauty, just like the farmers here insist on small plots and snug gray caps and brocaded sweaters. In the center of the circular town sits a twisted spire on the top of the gothic-style sixteenth century church. Little Rebecca thinks it looks like a benevolent witch's hat. Outside of the church, there is an art gallery across the street, and out of it wafts a Chopin nocturne. Little Rebecca, fourteen years old, leans

back in a chair at her desk and stares out the window at the green leaves of the big-leaf maple swallowing the sunlight.

At the convent, Jacqueline takes a picture of my phone in the box of white rice, charging and sitting on the windowsill. She wants to show her children an example of the lunacy of her young American friend. Little Rebecca wants a home, so I lay out my covers, dry out the rest of my clothing on a table, and start to write a letter to Brendan. My mom emails back. “Girl, I would never be mad about that!”

A little before seven, we walk to the convent courtyard to wait outside the chapel where the nuns will say vespers. Old ladies filter in, some with tall and contented backs, some with canes, some walkers. One lady stops to impress upon Jacqueline and me the magnificence of a grouchy cat, skittering in between all of us in the courtyard. Little Rebecca stares at the happiness in her old face.

In the church, we sit facing their sides as they sing Psalm 46 and the Magnificat in an echoing chant, feeble and strong voices together, all with a resonance of trust. *We will not fear*, they chant in French, *though the earth should shake...though its waters roar and foam*. We all sing Salve Regina, the Latin call to a mother that Little Rebecca and I will hear all the way through the Camino. *Mater misericordiae*, we appeal, “Mother of mercy”. *Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve*—life, sweetness, and our hope, hail to you.

At dinner, directly after the Vespers, we are given trays for soup and green beans and desserts. One especially friendly nun, about seventy years old, comes to sit by Rebecca and me. She speaks only French, but continues to try to talk to us, laughing and determined. “Where are you from?” she asks, and responds to our answer with the usual shriek of “Amerique! How far are you walking?” She shrieks again, “Saint Jacques!”

when we tell her we are going to Santiago. It's not the usual shriek, though. There is no fear or doubt, only joy. Little Rebecca reminds me of the emails I have received from a similar nun, across the Atlantic and the North American continent in Oregon, who is helping a young migrant family find a home. The nuns understand the journeys—border crossings, fatigue, homelessness, lack of a mother tongue, the need for family. Little Rebecca knows that the nuns are quietly calling to the voices in the wilderness, enfolding them between the wick and the candle flame, between psalm 46 and the Magnificat.

Sitting on my left side is a Norwegian man. He speaks English. He is going from Le Puy to Santiago for his *third* time in ten years, which makes Little Rebecca shudder in fear. At this point, she can't imagine even making it there once. "I like to go alone," he says. "I like silence. I just walk and walk, and then I eat and sleep." Little Rebecca turns back skittishly to the nun's social smiles.

The hospitalier—host—leads us to a small cinema in one of the convent vestibules to watch a short video on the convent's history. I want to know it so I can write about it, but it is all in French with hokey cartoons, so I leave early. Jacqueline leaves too. I write, and then pull the covers around my still-damp hair. I hold a shivering Little Rebecca all night.

~

We wake up in the convent to see Jacqueline doing her morning stretches, finishing each with a dainty, contented sigh. The phone, stuck in the rice, is dry, with no sign of a purple waterlogged screen—a miracle, perhaps. I let Little Rebecca run wild this morning, teaching me with no words, only with her chaotic, joyous bursts of energy. She has made a gleeful mess of my things in this room, and now she packs it all up in a hurry,

stuffing damp papers into pockets that somehow make sense. It all fits in my backpack like it has never fit before. At breakfast, she is giddy, throwing a peach onto her tray and tearing the soft flesh of a baguette, smothering it with strawberry jam. She watches with wonder and hidden disgust as women around her pour spoons full of table sugar into their plain yogurt. She giggles as, for the eighth morning, she drinks her coffee from a bowl—a bowl! That’s how they do it here! She is a precocious, inquisitive little thing, and asks everybody at the table for the reason they walk the Camino. Almost all say that they come because they have retired, and want to find a new rhythm.

It is all a rite of passage, I realize. Little Rebecca tells me to sit up straight, so that I can carry these new burdens with poise—the same burdens my companions come to shrug off. I lean down to Rebecca and say, “yes, I will—but I will also never abandon you.”

Little Rebecca, eleven years old, walks lightly on the trail, cooing to little baby goats in the convent garden and singing with Jacqueline, listening to Jacqueline’s accent make exotic the familiar lilting “Singin’ in the Rain” of all those afternoons home from the charter school with sister Clare and playmate Tacey. She points at horses in the pasture outside the town streets. She jumps through puddles that wanted to swallow her the day before.

On a hill outside of the tiny town outside of Espalion, Jacqueline and Little Rebecca and I run into Eleanor from outside of Vancouver, Canada, worried about her knee. We sit in a tiny meadow, a clearing of the woods on the hill we will soon climb, and look out at the kilometers we have just covered until the horizon stops our view. Little Rebecca feels small, and reminds me that her little legs have taken us here. We eat

chocolate and sausage and bread and an apple. “Listen,” I tell Little Rebecca again. “You may only be in this tiny meadow once.” But it is too much pressure.

~

In the evening, after a long day of play, she turns to me again. I take her to a café with waterfront tables by the river Lot in Estaing, where we are sleeping tonight, and we eat mint chocolate chip gelato as she watches a flock of birds circle once, twice, ten, twenty times around a tree and three medieval buildings by the river, circles upon circles, dizzy but free. I want to tell Little Rebecca, eight years old, to make herself dizzy. I want to give her permission to twirl and tangle herself into all sorts of hyper knots and stop to find herself safe in the same place she started. But I am too worried about the obligation of sight-seeing, dizzying myself instead with the “should” of visiting the castle that looms over me. By the time we get up from the table, mesmerized by the water below and the sun, my head has spun too much and we stagger to the pious donation-only gîte, too late for the castle visit, Little Rebecca dreading the damp bunkroom where they had us drop our belongings.

We go to dinner when the bell rings, walking up the crooked stairs and passing the murals depicting pilgrims outside of a cathedral. A married couple runs the gîte. Jacqueline has found a sociable, pretty Swiss girl, two years older than me, and they gab and laugh in French while I sit. The wife finishes the dinner preparation, and the husband makes us write in a book our name, email, country of origin, and pilgrimage destination. I write that I will go to Santiago and slide the binder back on the table without a sound, letting the husband converse with the French people in the room. Little Rebecca is skimming the shelves on the walls of the room, looking at jar after jar of homemade

jam—simplicity in berries and figs, sealed and stored. Little Rebecca, thirteen years old, retreats, mindful of braces and acne and thrift store jeans, as the walls close in on her language barriers. She watches the French pilgrims chat comfortably, eyeing her with that now-customary look of wonder and confusion. “What is she even doing here?” Little Rebecca imagines them thinking. Jacqueline taps her, shaking her out of her self-conscious stupor. “The hospitalier just said he will pray for you until you reach Santiago,” she tells me. They all go back to their chatting, and Little Rebecca retreats again. “See,” I tell her, “people notice you. People care.” But sometimes I still am not sure.

The couple invites us to evening prayers. We arrive late, wearing squeaky shower shoes, to their chapel with an altar that, the husband boasts, holds some special relic of a saint. The only other participant is a German woman, another more-enlightened old soul bound for Santiago, who says she has never been to a mass in her life. Little Rebecca would never know. She does not look alien at all, just simple, free of worry, and filled with the serene scent of figs and pines. The wife, in a plain and long blue denim dress across the room from her husband, prays to the *seigneur de l’univers* in a tinny voice, singing of God’s *gloire*, and asking in French for care of the pilgrims’ feet. Little Rebecca remembers her blisters, worsened by the rain, and adds a solemn, desperate voice to the prayer.

~

Little Rebecca starts walking early after another isolating breakfast meal in French, softened by the homemade jam. Nothing can convince her out of crying. We stay ahead of everybody, even with blisters that have somehow worsened overnight despite

meticulous treatment. Little Rebecca does not want to converse. She only wants to cry. She stops in the middle of the path and pulls out a notebook for a letter. “The truth,” she writes, “is that I feel completely unequipped for this journey...I try so hard every day—to write, to plan, to see the clouds moving, to make true friends despite language barriers, to stop wrestling with God (whatever *that* is, anyway). But the absolute truth is that there’s too much beauty, too much to write about, too much distance from home...I need somebody to tell me plainly, honestly, in solidarity, that they too are scared. I am just not feeling lighthearted yet.”

Little Rebecca is wailing and staring at the sky, like the hysterical fifteenth-century pilgrim Margery Kempe. She walks, then stops, then whimpers, then walks. We walk by a poplar tree that looks stunningly similar to the trembling Aspens in Montana, my favorite trees, age twenty. I stop walking.

There is a very specific reason I love Aspens. It is precisely because they tremble, like me, and the trunks stay upright. They tremble, and it’s written into their scientific name—*Populus tremulosus*. I’ve watched them shake at birds with silent wings departing, at the heat of July, at nothing. And nobody tells them they can’t, because we are all standing, mesmerized, by the shaking. They know something about frailty. They know something about living. Little Rebecca, standing in the doorway, knows it too.