

La maison d'Hortense

She was 97 and still tended her rose garden — her namesake Hortensia bushes, the berry brambles and fruit trees that filled the steeply terraced lot behind the house. Getting up and down those stone steps certainly took effort these days — but oh, that view was remarkable. Hortense loved this home as much as she loved her independence. She worked to quiet the ongoing concerns of her family members over her living alone. What could possibly happen at this point? While she woke grateful for another day each morning, she knew her time here on earth was growing short. How the end would come did not concern her in the least. She was fearless — because wise Hortense had allowed life to fuel her courage rather than spark anxieties.

Hortense insisted on caring for herself and living out her days in her childhood home, where she with her husband, Gaston, happily reared their daughter. The father of Hortense built the three-story home in the early 1930s. He situated it just above the historic center of Foix to take advantage of the sun through the cold winters and offer magnificent views of the mountains. He filled the terraced hillside with fruit and nut trees and arranged a square plot for a kitchen garden just outside the front door. The house served as the family's refuge for nearly a century. Eventually, Hortense's five grandchildren filled the rooms with sweet memories over the days spent here during their school holidays. She could still hear their joyful voices, chasing one another up and down the spiral staircase, making a day of exploring the treasures in the attic and picking their heart's content of whatever fruit was ripe. Of course, they were all grown now, with families of their own. And that is exactly how it should be, she thought. They are now making treasured memories in their own homes.

After giving her roses a quick trim, Hortense made her way to

the kitchen to prepare herself a cup of tea. Carefully carrying it around the corner into the sitting room, she felt an unusual heaviness come upon her. Perhaps the climb up the garden steps was too much for her today. She found a safe spot for her tea on the side table and eased herself onto the sofa. I'll just close my eyes here for a moment, she thought. And that is how Hortense left this world. Peacefully, with a smile on her face, having spent the morning tending to the home she so loved.

My scheduled seminars and succession of flights across Europe have come to an end and finally, the time came to travel from Kyiv to Foix. The first leg of the journey, from Kyiv to Frankfurt, was smooth — and there the delays began. From the very un-German-like chaos at passport control to the grounding of all flights into France, I saw my blissful return to Foix slipping away. And was the car rental process in Toulouse always so excruciatingly slow, or was my impatience getting the best of me? Hunger, exhaustion, 90-degree heat (even at 8 p.m.) and malfunctioning car air conditioning provided a meltdown recipe for sure. But the calm company of my travel buddy and navigator, Lena, helped me stay in check.

The welcome committee to Foix, Cathy and her charming partner Paul, had prepared a lovely evening meal of fresh vegetables and were full of suggestions for my weeks ahead. By the time we moved to the terrace to enjoy the beautiful night sky, it was nearing midnight and I could feel myself nodding off. Seeing my pitiful condition, Cathy ushered me off to my home for the next month, suggesting kindly that we talk more in the morning.

Under different circumstances, I would have jumped at the chance to explore this charming house, but my heavy lids and lack of focus left me no choice. I wanted nothing more than a quick shower and to find my way into bed. Asleep instantly, I slept with the deep peace and satisfaction of having reached

my final destination after the trek across Europe.

I woke to birdsong and the golden light of sunrise peeking over the mountains. The cool air morning air that drifted across my room was a welcome change after weeks in big cities. It was then that I became conscious of a comfort and peace that penetrated the very core of my being. This was a feeling that I associated with a place and time in my life, but where? I didn't dare stir in bed, afraid any movement would disrupt this perfect, dreamlike state. But was I dreaming, or was I awake? The sensation of familiarity was so profound it could not be ignored. I've been here before, I thought, not here physically but here in this feeling that warmed my heart and filled me with joy. This room, this house, had awakened memories so long tucked away — and they were of my grandmother. While my eyes may have delivered a different message, my heart conveyed that I was in my grandmother's house. Now before you (or my children, if they are reading this) begin to fret that I have become delusional, I do know I wasn't in my grandmother's house. And yet, in that moment I went back to 1970, in the tiny bedroom just a few steps from hers, in her Bay Area bungalow.

Growing up, my Grandma Tillie's house was my sanctuary from my childhood home, filled with chaos and trauma. I feel quite fortunate to have found a place of refuge for those first 11 years of my life. It was the only place I knew where I could count on waking up to safety and peace — and be fed meals prepared with love. Her presence was a balm to my young heart and soul.

Unfortunately, when I could have used her most as I approached adolescence, my grandmother passed suddenly. We were all there, picking her up for dinner out at her favorite Chinese restaurant. One moment she was full of life, joking with my father — and then she just sat down and was gone. In that split second, I lost my beloved grandmother — and maybe more important, my island of safety.

This past December, on another trip to Foix, I shared lunch with my new friend, Cathy. She had invited me to celebrate the completion of my book and to bid me farewell. We sat on her terrace soaking in the winter sun, enjoying the spectacular view of the mountains and the delicious meal she had prepared. I marveled at the serenity of her setting, given it was a just a five-minute walk from the downtown market and shops. Teasing Cathy, I tasked her with finding me a house on her street for the upcoming summer. I don't know which one of us was more surprised when she actually did, and it was right next door to hers!

As my summer plans solidified, Cathy contacted the owner of the house next door — Hortense's daughter. She was delighted to have an opportunity to share her mother's house and worked out a simple agreement with Cathy. As it turned out, aside from some cleaning and gardening, the house had been virtually untouched for three years. And if truth be told, it felt like it hadn't been touched since the 60s!

So this is how I came to stay in what is truly still Hortense's home. Her lively energy and determination are still very present — as well as her flair for decorating, which includes the frequent use of crocheted doilies. ☐ My first week has been an interesting opportunity for self-discovery, as there are certainly times in my life when this setting would have felt just a bit creepy. But it actually could not be further from the truth. Here and now, this house is a welcome respite from my teaching and travels, from finally finishing that third book, from a year of moving houses and all that this year of motherhood has delivered. I am grateful to Hortense for creating such a welcome space, and I could not feel more at home. And who knew it would be in the French mid-Pyrenees where I would connect with my long-deceased California grandmother?

Stay tuned, because this story has just begun! I've had quite the week of setting up house and shifting into the slower pace

and simple pleasures of village life. If you'd like to tag along on this journey, you can keep up with my daily adventures on Instagram!