

BIRTH AND CREATION

“The Truth About Smelly People”

Emily Peters

From this side, it seems ridiculous. All the stereotypes, the crazed ideas driven into my head were absurd. They're all mean and rude, and they smell, and all they eat is cheese, and they hate all Americans. As Mumu, my French rent-a-mom and soon close friend, said, “Can you imagine an entire country full of smelly people?” Touché. It might be hard to imagine a country whose entire population literally stinks, but I would prefer imagining an entire country falling prey to believing in these stereotypes to be harder. At least, after having ventured out on this great French adventure, that's the way I see it.

I awoke to nervous pains in my stomach. At least I think that's what it was. There was quite a variety of sources to choose from for my nausea: the airline food, the long bus ride, exhaustion, etc., but anxiety seems to fit the best in this case. There were thirty-five of us. Thirty-five lost souls cursing their-eight-month-ago-selves. Why had they striven so hard to embark upon this horrid adventure? The placement tests, the scores of forms, and the much anticipated interview all seemed like payment for a new form of torture, to go to a country full of

mean and smelly people. I have always been afraid of offending people. I never want to step on peoples' toes and have them lash back at me. I think that it stemmed from this, my fear of being chastised or ridiculed. My timidity had always been a problem, and seemed to magnify when I thought of the constant contact with this mean people among whom I was going to be living.

But these thoughts were soon flushed out of my head by the dominant voice of one of our soon-to-be instructors, Caroline. She had a baby face and independent air that produced the over-all effect of an obstinate toddler trapped in a twenty-seven year old body. She explained to us three times that, when our names were called, we were to go out and meet our new families. The image of a firing range immediately flashed through my mind, each stranger's face another bullet whistling through the air straight to my nerves. Caroline started announcing the first victims. I was so relieved that I was not one of the first. I looked out of the bus window trying to pick out the people I would be living with for the next seven weeks. I spotted one that fit the description on the sheet I had received three weeks before my flight: three little girls, Alexandra, Coralie, and Marie, ages 6, 4, and 2. The names kept coming and coming, but I was still left there, my anxiety starting to show. I realized that I was gripping the back of my seat with all my strength. I looked across the aisle to the only person whom I knew on the

entire continent. Her spine was as straight and just about as limber as a telephone pole, and her face showed a mix of worry and weariness. Her name was called, and she proceeded to rise, stiffly, and make her way down the little staircase and off the bus. I felt completely alone. I didn't really like Lindsey all that much, but her presence gave me some comfort all the same. My nails had almost reached the foam padding of the seat when I finally heard my name called. I wrenched myself from my seat and started toward the door.

As I stepped off the bus, my world was thrown into an endless rush. The family I had seen was apparently not my own, which I guessed when a strange woman came up to me from the other side and started kissing me on the cheeks. She said hello and introduced herself as Murielle, at least I think she did. My French wasn't stellar even when I had been well rested and calm, but my shattered nerves and the race to get my luggage were no help whatsoever. When we finally got all my suitcases together, the first real sentence that my new host mom said to me was "*Mon Dieu, comme tu as des tas de baggages!!*" The first impression I gave was that of having lots of baggage. But we were off to the car before I could give it any more thought.

En route to my new home for the next seven weeks, Murielle tried to make conversation. I tried to follow as best I could, but all I could catch were random sentence fragments and words like "nursing job" and "car". I emphatically responded *oui*

to everything, hoping to God that she was asking yes or no questions for which yes was an acceptable response. I thought I was doing all right when she suddenly pulled over on the side of the road. We were next to a huge building, seemingly that of offices or something of the business nature. She said something that I did not understand in the least. Then she started vigorously pointing to the car in front of us, which had also stopped, apparently in some relation to us. I don't know how, but I eventually got the message that I was to get into the other car, for what reason, I still to this day don't know. I walked over and got in as Murielle went into the building. I saw another American in the car, realized that this must be another one of my group, and was somewhat relieved, that was until the woman in the front seat started talking. She had a kind face filled with child-like excitement. But, unfortunately, that excitement carried over into the speed of her words, and I was even more lost with this random woman in whose car I was sitting for reasons I didn't know than I had been with Murielle and the pointing. Thankfully, the American girl I found myself sitting next to spoke much better than I did and did most of the responding, except for my occasional contribution of "*oui*." After about five minutes of confusion and head nodding, Murielle's face appeared in my window, and I felt saved. A lot of what Murielle said just flowed in one ear and out the other, but I could catch more of her words than the lightning fast ones that bolted from

the mouth of the other woman. The French language really does have a beautiful flow. The only problem I found was getting the flow to stop or go slow enough to understand it. Getting back in the car with Murielle, I was so grateful that she kept her composure and didn't spew a thousand words a minute. This relief helped to calm me a little, and I started to understand things better. The chatterbox from the other car was actually Murielle's mother, and I would be seeing a lot more of her and hearing a lot more of her excited babble, for which she was known.

We turned into a driveway that seemed to appear out of nowhere from a wall on the side of the street. I saw a little girl standing in the doorway of what I was guessing to be my new French residence. Her meek smile was covered in chocolate. Mumu, as the little girl called Murielle, told her to go in and wash up for dinner. My stomach dropped. I had completely forgotten about dinner. They had told all of the stagiaires, the students on this adventure, to expect a big meal and be ready to show our appreciation of the trouble taken to prepare it. Mumu, her husband Mich, and I lugged all my suitcases into my room, as Alexandra and Coralie watched. "Marie" was really a little boy named Manu, who had lived with the family for a year to escape the abuse at his home. I tried to start arranging things, but was soon rushed out for dinner. Oh, God, I thought, I don't want to offend them, I don't know any

French table manners, I don't know what to say, I don't have the words to say anything even if I had something to say, I don't know how to eat, how much to take, how to eat it, etc., etc.

I went into the kitchen and saw the lavish feast: cold ham slices and noodles on the side. I must have looked shocked because Mumu apologized profusely for the meager dinner. But, actually, I was ecstatic. The modest meal was just what I wanted: low-stress and easy to eat with a fork, which I immediately recognized as the utensil of choice. It was nice. I saw a lot of my fears start to melt away. These people were strangers, sure enough, but they were people all the same. They eat and sleep and talk and joke and laugh and love, just like my family back home, almost 4,000 miles away. It seems like a lot to see after sitting down to one meal with one family, but in reality, it isn't. These acts are common to almost every human being in most societies. To see the parallels between my real family and my new French family was the biggest help I could have imagined.

As the days passed, we became closer and closer. And as my vocabulary improved, I no longer felt like a recluse inside my own head. I went to class everyday and learned a lot from the teachers as well as the other students. It was great. The four teachers were between the ages of 26 and 30, which still makes me laugh when I think of the horrified face my mother made after this little tidbit of information hit her ear for the first time.

For the things I couldn't understand about culture, I asked Mumu or my instructors for explanations, and they gave them to me. If I had a problem all I had to do was ask. If I looked stupid, oh well. No pain, no gain. Going to class everyday was a relief because I saw others as vexed as I was sometimes. A room full of thirty high school students who looked like they had just been through the apocalypse was never so inviting, believe me. This didn't mean that all my problems were solved immediately, but just remembering that people are people, no matter what continent they live on or what language they speak was a great help. With this newfound motto, I was able to relax and enjoy the beautiful French coast and the wonderful food, which was definitely much more than ham and pasta. Going into the grocery store was the edible equivalent of the discovery of King Tut's tomb. The smells of truly fresh seafood, the chocolate bar aisle, and the boundless arrays of pastries and breads lured even the most sage of students to splurge their funds.

Shortly before I left to come back to the U.S., Mumu and I talked about all the French and American stereotypes, and how a lot of these had contributed to my fears in the beginning. One little remark changed my whole perception of stereotypes: "Can you imagine an entire country full of smelly people?" Expressed in such terms, it all seemed so ridiculous. All these labels couldn't possibly be true. I felt so foolish but even more disappointed. Everyone I had talked to back home had these

silly stereotypes so tightly wound in their heads that they never thought to try and look past them. Not only did I find friends and the world's best grocery stores in France; I found a little bit of wisdom, too.

Questions for discussion: What wisdom does Emily find in France? Is she tolerant because she knows more about the people of France or because she realizes that she understands so little about herself? How does Emily see language "barriers"? Based on this essay, what would Emily's definition of "narrative writing" be?