

La

Fête

du

Pla

By Manon de Raad

In the south of France, every village has a specific date during the summer months known as *La Fête du Village*. My mother spent her weekends and vacations in Le Pla, a tiny village in the Pyrenees. If you look up Le Pla on a map, you are not likely to find it. Thirty people, maybe fewer, live in this hamlet all year long. Every summer, my family still goes there to relax and stay in touch with other family members, and every fifteenth of August we participate in *La Fête du Pla*.

Most fifteenths of August are the same. Every year it is the same old routine with the same old people. Don't get me wrong, though. I love it! I enjoy watching the villagers, most of them over seventy, hobbling out of their houses to greet their friends, play a game of *boules* and have a light *apéro* while tapping their feet to the music coming out of the village's P.A. system.

When the clock strikes noon, not a soul can be found on the street. Lunch in the south of France is a ritual and probably twice as filling as an American dinner. But on the fifteenth of August, lunch in Le Pla is, in my opinion, *three* times as filling as an American dinner. My aunt Denise keeps the tradition of organizing such a lunch for family members and close friends.

For me, every fifteenth of August is a liturgy. I wake up in a bad mood, thinking that it is unfair to have to get up at ten in the morning during summer vacation. But after I have taken a shower and brushed my teeth, my attitude changes. A light breakfast of *Nesquick* and *biscottes* usually precedes my short walk to the village to wish everyone *bonjour*. Our house is not exactly inside the village; it is probably fifty feet after the big sign with an X over the words LE PLA. But this is not a real problem—a small walk before a

big day is healthy.

The first person I usually meet is Raymond. He is a kind old man, but it is unwise to engage him in conversation. If one is not careful, one could be stuck in one of his many stories for hours. I usually just wave and keep walking. I know this may seem unkind, but he scares me. He is always dressed in exactly the same way: tight, black pants, a dark blue, short jacket which is always open, a knit vest, and an old, brown cap. He often has a piece of straw between his partially toothless jaws, which he masticates like a cow. As one approaches him, he begins to squint, frantically trying to focus and clearly see who it is. When I am about three feet away from him, he cheers, "Ah, it's the American girl!" then approaches me quickly, removes his cap, and begins another story. Just as quickly as he has approached me, I try to pull away, making up some lame excuse about having to go tend the sheep.

The next thing I usually come across is a game of *boules* in full progress. I suppose I should explain this game; it is typical of the south of France. To play *boules*, also known as *pétanque*, you need two teams. Each team can have as many players as it wants. Each player gets two or three *boules de pétanque*, depending on the number of players. A small wooden ball, called a *cochonnet*, is thrown onto any surface the players choose (concrete, grass, earth). Then, the players take turns trying to throw their *boules* (heavy, steel balls about the size of the palm of one's hand) toward the *cochonnet*. The team whose *boules* are the closest to the *cochonnet* at the end of the game wins. Most people from the south of France regard this simple game as the source of life.

After having watched a game or two of *boules*, I head toward Aunt Denise's house because I know everyone will al-



ready be there having their pre-lunch *apéro*. When I arrive, there are usually at least fifteen people out in the front yard. You can't really call Denise's front yard a yard. It is a blend of dust and concrete, covered by an array of animal droppings set in bright sunlight. By the time everyone has settled down with their glasses of *pastis*, it is usually around noon and not a spot of shade can be found. Most of the adults don't seem to mind, though; they have their cool glasses of *pastis*. *Pastis* is something else typically from the south of France. It is a type of liquor made from anise seeds. When mixed with water, it forms a milky liquid which is very cool and very refreshing. Because it has alcohol in it, the children have to settle for lukewarm sodas and, believe me, in the midday sun, warm soda is really nasty. Personally, I think one can't even taste the alcohol in *pastis*, but it's no use complaining.

Finally, around one P.M., my uncle Gerard invites us all into his dark and damp cellar where three long tables have been set up for lunch. Despite its dampness and darkness, his cellar is greatly appreciated, for the temperature inside this cellar is usually half of what it is outside.

I usually end up at the table where all my cousins and my cousins' friends are seated; it is a rare treat when I don't end up next to my cousin Roger. Roger is nice but can be an incredible pain. In the middle of my meal, he'll push me right off the end of the bench. After he has done this, he turns to his friends and gets

and *la salade*, it has always been snails in marinara sauce. Everyone seems to enjoy them. All my uncles and aunts, cousins, and Grandma seem to enjoy stick-

Denise's front yard is a blend of dust and concrete, covered by an array of animal droppings set in bright sunlight.

ing a wooden toothpick into the main course's shell, pulling it out slowly, and popping it into their mouths. Personally, I find it revolting. Not only the thought, but the taste as well. Denise's snails are always crusty, as if they were cooked in sand. Every fifteenth of August I remember to eat a lot of *melon*, *charcuteries*, and *salade*. And after I've passed all my snails to my father, who enjoys them more than anyone else, I have a large slice of peach tart from the bakery in the next village.

During the meal, among all the joyous shouting and laughing, we always manage to hear the traditional knocks on the door. During *La Fête du Pla*, the village orchestra comes to play at everyone's dinner table. They play songs such as the *Lambada* and other tunes with a Spanish air to them. After this, they hand out dried flowers in exchange for five franc coins. Then they are rewarded with a tall glass of *pastis* and leave quite satisfied. The houses at the end of the village are usually greeted by a rather woozy orchestra! Twelve drinks of *pastis* in one day may be too much.

I am allowed to leave the dinner table at around four-thirty. It is a great feeling to finally get up from these hard wooden benches and stretch out my legs. My sister and I often enjoy watching the neighbor's rabbits after lunch. They always seem so calm and appear as though nothing in the world can disturb them. They are the complete opposite of the chickens that run around Gerard and Denise's "yard." These animals hop around nervously, clucking loudly and twitching their heads every so often. I hate them. There is nothing more irritating than a psychotic chicken after a large meal.

Five-thirty is usually the time I start to head home, often on my own. My parents stay at my uncle and aunt's to digest the invertebrates they have just gulped down, and my sister spends the rest of her day with Audrey, her friend. So, until around eight or so, I am mostly on my own. I don't mind, though; it gives

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the whole table laughing. If I don't end up next to Roger, I'll end up at a different table surrounded by people I barely know, who keep squealing about how cute I was when I was a baby. No matter where I'm sitting, my aunt Sylvie always manages to ask me an embarrassing question, and once again, the whole table starts cracking up. That is probably what I like the least about the fifteenth of August. That and our main course.

The main course is always, always snails. It seems to be Denise's specialty. After *le melon*, *les charcuteries*,



me more time to prepare for the final festivities of the day. By the time my parents and sister return, around eight, I am ready to leave for *le bal*. My parents and Aysha still have to shower and change before leaving for the area of the village where *le bal* will be held. By nine-thirty, we are all on our way to the evening ball where the rest of my family are waiting for us. This part of the fifteenth of August always makes me feel giddy. I leave all excited and anxious, and often come back tired and disappointed.

The music at *le bal* is always too loud. It feels as if the sound waves are traveling through my feet into my heart, until I can actually hear it beat. Ever since I was little, my father has always dragged me onto the dancing platform to try to dance with me. I waltz with him until I can hear the other kids snickering. I know afterwards that no one really pays much attention to me, but when I am out there, being dragged around by my dad, I could swear the whole world is watching me and laughing.

I guess I make it seem as though the fifteenth of August is the most dreaded day in the year: Raymond, warm soda, snails, and *le bal*. But the feeling I get when lying in bed at night, thinking back upon the day, is unbeatable. I never fail to laugh or at least smile while recalling the events of *La Fête*. It may seem awkward to someone who has never spent his/her childhood summers in a village in the south of France, someone who has never had warm soda in unbearable heat, someone who has never had crusty snails or had to waltz in front of the entire world, but that is how I see it—the funniest day of the whole year. And whenever I feel sad, angry, or even bored, looking back at a day spent with my whole family is the best possible remedy. ★

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