

The fantasy of my childhood summers

When I was a child, I lived in Paris. We lived in the XVeme arrondissement, a quiet and bourgeois area of the town. Even if the life in Paris was sweet, punctuated with school, friends, games, homework, I cherished school breaks, specially the longest one in summer, for my sister and I spent all these free days with our grandparents in our family house in the Southwest of France.

Just after school, on the very first evening of the break, we left Paris, my mother stressed by the Parisian traffic jam on our way to the Orly Airport. Traveling without our parents, we were part of the excited children's group who loudly invaded the cabin. Since my childhood, being in an airport, smelling the delicate fragrance of kerosene, listening to the standardized voice of the speaker, getting into a cabin are linked with happiness, excitement. At our arrival, my grandparents were waiting for us, an indefectible soft sweet smile on their face.

During the one hour journey from Bordeaux to the farm, we shared news about schools and grades regarding my sister and friends regarding me. Usually, my grandmother had cooked for us our favorite dishes, and we were not able to leave the table until we finished them! As a time life countryside resident, she found that Paris gave us a grey complexion and that, consequently, we needed air, exercise, and wine! Every morning, around 10 o'clock, she filled two glasses with half red wine, half water, and some sugar in order to help our recovering!

The house, Pauilhac, really isolated at that time, stands on the top of the hills with the fields of the farm all around. It is more than 150 years old. A large park surrounds the principal building; a church with a small cemetery is located at her north east side. It is quite a big house, 2 main floors, 7 rooms per floor, a large mysterious cave. The ceilings are at least 3 meters high. During summer, its thick stone walls protect the interior from the outside warmth, living rooms plunged into the cool shadows of the closed shutters. I remember that Lea, my sister, and I only wore a swimsuit for two months, having our breakfast and then sharing our time between swimming in the pool, criss-crossing the park with our bikes, playing ping pong, the felicity! The pool is ideally oriented in the rear of the house, built near a small cliff of the hills, the wonderful landscape of soft green hills and the majestic old trees of the park all around.

We spent our day inventing games such as Olympic diving contest, aquatic dances, Playmobil-pirates-battles and Barbies-on-vacation. The sun shone every single day. Our skin getting tanned and our hair turning blond, we only smelled cut grass and sweet flowers nectar, only heard the silence of the sun-crushed nature, sometimes disturbed by brave bees' buzz. Regularly at night, storms broke the peacefulness of the summertime. Alone in my large bedroom, I enjoyed them, so strong, powerful, and loud from the depth of my bed, the suddenly unfamiliar shadows of the furniture's projected on the walls by the violent light of the flashes; however, I felt secure with my grandparents sleeping in their first floor bedroom.

At the head of the house, my grandfather, the sweetest man I've ever met. We listened to his conversation with one of the farm workers during lunch, speaking about rain, sun, cows, corn and wheat, all fabulous and mysterious subjects for our city hears. He never raised his voice, but his authority did not need it. Farmers from around often came to get advice and help. His goodness had no limit. He had spent few months in a German working camp during the Second World War and kept from the experience an incommensurable feeling of luck for not having died during this horrible period. He was wise, and he ran the house not only strictly but softly, as well. His sparkling eyes lighted our days and when he was proud of us, we could not have been happier.

It is weird how grown people remember their childhoods. Sun, pool, warmth, freedom, nature and love would be the words which fit my summer vacation. I can not remember a single rainy day. Memory is so selective. I realized a couple of years ago that rainy days are numerous during summer in the Southwest of France.

One day, nine years ago, on a warm summer evening, I was feeding my dying grandfather, trying to make him smile, and with his sweet voice- he was not hungry of course- he asked me to drive his wheelchair to the place he pointed with his finger. There, silently, he enjoyed the view we have from the swimming pool, his face not only tired and gaunt with illness but confident and relaxed, my hands on his shoulder. He knew. The day after, he died, quietly, peacefully. Since that day, the house, of course, stands at the same place on the top of the hills with the park and the church, and the cemetery where he is buried, but the fantasy is gone. Discreet, calm, soft, simple, clever, open minded, he was the spirit of Pauilhac, of our family.