**Choose Again**

Nora-Lyn Veevers

Being twenty years old in Lyon, France means the *clack, clack, clack* of heels on cobblestones. It’s 1971. You’re skirting pigeons as you dash across the plaza, yeasty aroma of ready-to-pick-up baguette, Chez-Mado’s tiny Gauloise-smoke-filled café tucked between the stone buildings of the University of Lyon economics department and the foreign students’ language department. You attend third term in that café where the economics boys filter in, where friendships are forged. Where you cement the French idiom in your language centre—and in your heart. Where you flirt, engage in repartee, form friendships—camping trips, music festivals, ski weekends. It means the cozy alpine chalet filled with friends, where the firelight dances and romance flares in secret (you think) glances. You eat just-out-of-the-oven four o’clock goûté of barely-sweet brioche stuffed with melting dark chocolate but promptly walk off the pounds at the first burst of spring. You stare at fried calf brains, blood pudding, startling pigs’ feet on your dinner plate not wanting to offend. You want to go back to your mom’s kitchen, learn to cook something.

Being twenty in France means you have a seven-year-old in your care, her tiny voice pleads *Nora-Lyn* at the kitchen table after her mother berates her, abandons the room for the child to *figure it out!* because her pencil refuses to conjure the right answers for her math homework. *Laissez-la, Nora-Lyn*, warns Madame. (*Leave her to it*.) You want to travel back, quietly pull cutlery out of the drawer, sit beside that little girl, and show her with spoons how numbers work.

Being twenty in 1971 France means no telephone in your host’s home and making calls—stomach clenching—at the neighbourhood Taverne. The barman lifts the phone over as you deposit money on the counter, snub the leers of rheumy-eyed men with drink in hand, unfiltered Gitane fumes swath steamy windows, nicotine-stained smirks spread at the sight of a foreign jeune fille. You want to tell that twenty-year-old to smile into those lonely faces with a jaunty *Comment-ça-va-messieurs?* hang up the phone, finger-flutter *au revoir les amis* as the door jangles its alert on your way out.

Being twenty in France means sunshine cleansing a cloudless sky; the energy of the perfect spring day; colonization and migration; being the other. It’s the young North African at the bus stop that day—possibly a student like you—face creased in worry, lacking enough coins in his palm for the fare. His brown eyes like liquid pools search faces, lips move unwilling to beg as the French mothers look away, scurrying their kids onto the bus. You want to climb off that bus before it pulls away leaving him behind, give him the money. Because you’re twenty, you’re not brave enough to be different.

Being twenty in France means you have three young boys in your care that summer in Nice—all arms and legs and warm hugs for you. It means evenings of delicate air, dinners on the wide terrace overlooking the turquoise sea in the distance, sun slipping behind the horizon. It means you shop for cheeses, wines, everything kosher for the dinner your hosts are having for Miss Beauty-Queen-from-Israel (in your memory she is Miss Israel). She is twenty years old, her willowy body floats as her not-quite-clingy gossamer dress drapes from the shoulders, skims the hips and caresses the knees. It means, you feel like she has taken you in as one of the kids at the table as she talks about studying architecture, meditating at Temple while you can’t help gawking. For fun that summer you make a halter top from a greeny-yellowy discarded curtain. This triangle of repurposed fabric hangs down your skinny chest. Monsieur queries before the guests arrive, *Tu insistes?* (*Are you sure about that?*). You want to turn back time, shed that halter top, put on the white t-shirt, bell-bottom jeans, dangly earrings, give the kids your full attention, make their end of the table the fun place to sit on the night Miss Israel comes to dinner.

Being twenty in France means strolling hand-in-hand—the salty Mediterranean breeze kisses your skin, the sun drenches the Promenade des Anglais, sapphire waves slap the shore, slip away. It doesn’t occur to you that you won’t be back. You wave *goodbye*, hearts cracking, from the Plateaux Fleuris. Being twenty years old means not looking forward and choosing. At the heart of it all—not being able to go back and change.