# Sanctuary

# *Christiane Buuck*

Saint Bernadette Soubirous . . . witnessed eighteen apparitions of Our Blessed Lady at Lourdes, from February 11, 1858, to July 16 of the same year. She was instructed to make known the healing powers which the Blessed Virgin . . . would give to the miraculous spring of Lourdes. A worker who had lost an eye in an explosion recovered his sight when he washed his face in this water; a dying child was plunged into the small basin . . . and the next day began to walk. The police attempted to stop the crowds from going to the Grotto for the foretold apparitions, but were unable to do so.— Lives of the Saints for Every Day of the Year

**H*er grandfather died during a lunch*** of roast rabbit and dandelion greens he had picked that very morning. He was wearing his best suit, and he slowly keeled forward as if to smell the food, then slumped onto his plate. She saw this from across the table, and even though some part of her understood that Papi had left her, the other part wanted to scold him for getting vinaigrette on his lapels. “Ça va, Papi?” she called out, unable to absorb the fact that she would no longer see him doing his morning calisthenics under the pine tree in the garden or hear his cheerful whistling as he shaved, that she was left again with just her husband and their children in the echoing house, and that her childhood and all the kindness that had filled it was now officially over.

“Papi!” she repeated, standing and shaking him.

Papi had lived with them for only thirteen months. He’d arrived in May of 1968, just before the worst of the strikes and protests erupted in Paris and throughout France. By June of 1969 she’d thought her family was finally beginning to accept him, despite the fact that his mind strayed so much he had forgotten everything except his mother, her unmatched Burgundian cuisine, and his great fondness for snails.

His granddaughter, for her part, had done everything she could to make him comfortable, an easy enough task because, so long as there were regular meals, he was cheerful and pliant. She had been too busy during those months to think much beyond the routines of the house, the cooking and cleaning and shopping and laundry and the needs of her husband and the children and Papi. There had never been time to take Papi to visit his brother and sister, who lived in Roanne, not far to the east. She’d told herself that Papi might not even recognize them after so many years, or they him, aged as they all were.

Yet when Papi died, his siblings appeared beside his grave at the funeral, frail and translucent, the last of their generation. They dressed in wool sweaters even in the early-summer heat and stood as straight as their curving spines allowed as they received the usual condolences. She stood beside them in her black dress and black gloves and was grateful for their faint odor of mothballs, the way they made do without asking a thing of her. Widow and widower, they shared a house out of convenience, though someone who did not know them might have mistaken them for a married couple. Her hair was halo-like over a pale scalp, and his nose hairs trailed from his nostrils to merge with a pure white mustache.

“Of course. . . . Indeed. . . . So kind,” they said again and again, shaking hands as people filed past the grave, leaving everyone impressed with the dignity of the old ways of mourning.

She clutched her handkerchief, managing only nods when not disentangling the children from her skirt, so glad for her great-aunt and great-uncle, for the respectable send-off they gave Papi, who had told her once that he wanted to be buried in Tangier beside his wife — an impossibility. She stood beside them and imagined their tidy house, their afternoons wrapped in blankets near radiators, Debussy playing softly on the turntable, their diet of starches and silence. When they invited her to visit, she began to weep.

“I’d like that,” she said.

For eight months she saved, thinning her soups with water, buying cheaper cuts of meat, dividing her own portions between the children. Economizing distracted her from the emptiness in the house. Her husband never noticed. If he had, he would have given her less for the food allowance.

Even when the money was saved, she bought the tickets secretly and told her husband they had shown up mysteriously in the mail: a gift from her great-aunt and great-uncle.

“They just arrived. Voilà!” she lied, her voice bright.

He was furious. “You can’t just go off like that. Send them back.”

“It’s only three days,” she said. “It’s nothing at all!” But he had already walked out and slammed the door.

And still she wouldn’t have gone except her great-aunt and great-uncle were so old — ninety-three and ninety-six they were now — and there would be no time after this baby, the third child, was born.

It’s not as if she left her husband without notice. She cooked all his meals in advance and placed them in labeled foil packets in the freezer. He would need only to turn on the oven and wait. She made arrangements for the children to stay with her husband’s brother and sister-in-law. She cleaned the house completely, even using a toothbrush on the bathroom grout to ease her guilt at going. She packed her valise three times in anticipation. She wrote her return information on a slip of paper and slid it under the day’s baguette where her husband couldn’t miss it. He drove her to the station — she’ll grant him that: forty kilometers to the station at Lourdes. (The tickets were cheaper if she left from Lourdes.) But he refused to speak to her, and when she got out of the car, he sped away so quickly that her legs were stung by the spray of gravel.

His anger, the way he left her like that, made her pause and almost reconsider. Perhaps she was being disloyal, like he said. Perhaps she was a bad mother. But when the train pulled in, she boarded it and pushed these thoughts away.

When she arrived in Roanne, a young man was there to meet her. He drove her to the edge of town, where her great-aunt and great-uncle waited at their front door, her great-aunt waving a handkerchief edged in lace, as if greeting some kind of celebrity. Their cheeks were cold when she kissed them, and she wondered how long they had been standing in the hollow winter sunlight. She tried to hurry them in, afraid they would catch a chill, but her great-aunt laid a cool hand on her face and said, “We don’t have many visitors, do we, Etienne?” And her great-uncle said, “Well, well.” Then Grande-Tante Mireille took her arm, both to lead her in and to steady herself as they walked. She moved slowly, in pace with her great-aunt’s shuffle. When she turned around, her valise was inside the small entryway, and the young man had gone. She would have liked to thank him.

That night Grande-Tante Mireille made roast beef and asked her to cut the butcher strings because her hands shook. Mireille made a potato gratin and a carrot purée. She spread cheeses on her dusty cheese platter, all of them new and soft. Grand-Oncle Etienne uncorked an old bottle from the cellar.

“Here,” he said, handing the bottle to her after he had poured all the glasses. “This one’s from the year you were born.” They clinked glasses, and Etienne winked. “Not a bad year,” he said. The wine tasted of damp earth and raspberries and lime.

Mireille and Etienne ate mostly the purée and a little cheese. She, out of good manners and a surprising hunger, took seconds, then thirds. She ate until her stomach was distended and painful, then took one more bite of baguette. She drank two glasses of wine and heard herself laughing over dessert, a pear tart. Her great-aunt and great-uncle talked the most, their words cutting in and out of each other. If she didn’t know any better, she would have imagined something of a happy marriage between them. Perhaps that is the secret, she thought: to spend a life with someone familiar.

Their stories spilled over the table, burnished with time and retelling, all the characters long dead, her great-aunt and great-uncle spinning the past around them. She was certain she would hear these same stories if she came back again, and wanted immediately to do just that. The mere thought of coming back made her feel relaxed (though it could have been the wine), and she laughed out loud at the story about the farmer who had stolen their father’s champagne only to have the bottle explode in the barn and scare his cow dead.

“Pow!” Etienne exclaimed. Mireille rocked back and clapped her hands. Their eyes shone with delight. She wanted to gather them close, to protect them.

They waited on her, and she didn’t protest. Etienne sliced another piece of cheese for her to taste.

“Oh, you must,” Mireille insisted. “We know the farmer. His grandfather was friends with our father.”

It was a simple hard cheese that smelled slightly of silage, but when she bit into it, the taste blossomed in her mouth, more taste than she could remember since childhood meals of mutton and prune tagines, or the honey candies from Papi’s vest pocket that always held the flavor of flowers. She ate every bite, then allowed her body to sink into a bed she had not made herself. When she woke in the middle of the night, it was not her usual insomnia but a weightlessness, as if she were floating. The room tipped like a cradle. After a while she padded to the kitchen and washed the pans Mireille had left to soak. She found Etienne’s dentures waiting there in a glass beside the sink. Even these were beautiful. Distorted by the water, they could have been pearls. When she returned to her room she rested with her eyes open, her hands on her belly, enveloped in the ancient feather bed, and wondered at so much sensation. Her body light and easy, time luxurious and full.

Three days and two nights. She forgot, by the second day, to think about her children, because in her great-aunt’s eyes she was so very young that she could feel thirteen again, life all around her, pushing her forward toward beautiful things.

When she left on the third day, her relatives stood at the front door, and Mireille waved her handkerchief just as before, so for a second she wasn’t sure if she were coming or going. The same young man took her case and the bag that had held gifts for her great-aunt and great-uncle but now held gifts for the children. The man drove her to the train station in the center of town and walked her luggage all the way to the platform; he insisted on it, even though his car was double-parked. She boarded the train that propelled her into the past and the future both at once, giving her time to shift perspectives, to find her edges again, the places where her body and the world met.

Outside Toulouse the train jerked to a halt. The bag of gifts spilled. A man across the aisle snapped his newspaper and turned the page. The conductor came through and said there would be a delay. “Maybe an hour,” he said. She heard whispers that someone had thrown himself under the train. She settled back and watched dusk fall over unknown suburbs, her stomach gurgling, fullness already slipping away. She wouldn’t have to make dinner tonight, she thought. She was glad, even though she knew it was selfish. It was wrong to be glad for the delay. But she was.

Later, as the train finally pulled into the station at Lourdes, she gathered her bundles, the sweets for the children, the small trinkets her great-aunt and great-uncle had sent along: the garish red candied almonds of Lyon, a bottle of wine, the local cheese. She stepped onto the frigid platform, and only when the whistle blew and the train shuddered away did she realize she was standing alone in the halo of her breath. Her husband was not there to pick her up. The other passengers dispersed, and the stationmaster went back to the warmth of his office. The parking lot was deserted, and white dots of street lights marked the way home until the road twisted out of sight beyond a cluster of buildings.

She stood on the brightest part of the platform, determined to be visible when her husband finally came, so there would be no yelling about her making him wait. She didn’t want any yelling right now. The quiet of the empty platform suited her, even as wind gusts brought the metallic smell of snow off the Pyrenees.

In her mind she could see their house, down to the dented place in the sink where she had once dropped a casserole dish and the broken hinge on the spice cabinet that meant she had to open the door just so to keep it from falling off completely. In her mind she walked from room to room, felt the brush of sanded wood against her hand as she pushed open the door to the children’s bedroom. Tomorrow she would change the sheets, clean the bathroom, take the children outside after lunch so they could play in the fresh winter air.

Perhaps there was a problem with one of the children. She checked her watch. She would wait another five minutes, she decided, though she didn’t know what she would do then. Her ankles ached in stockings turned to nets of ice. Her shoes, the kind one wears to make a good impression, seemed flimsy and stupid now.

There are worse things than cold, she told herself. She rose up on tiptoe again, leaned out to see another centimeter of the road, still desolate. He’s on his way, she thought. Her belly strained against the fabric of her coat a little now, though she wasn’t showing much, hadn’t with the other two either. She wondered if the baby could feel the cold. She felt brittle, her skin no thicker than a sheet of ice and just as easily cracked. Everything in her clenched against the steady wind. She couldn’t tamp down her uncertainty.

There was a rumbling on the track behind her as a train of pilgrims arrived, brakes screaming, the engine’s headlight raking the tracks. The passengers stared out, pressed hands against the glass, and fogged the windows with their exclamations. One woman waved at the empty platform. Perhaps she’s waving at me, she thought, but she didn’t wave back.

Nuns from a nearby convent appeared and swept past with such energy that she felt jostled and purposeless. They rolled gurneys and wheelchairs to the train and unloaded the ailing, including the woman, who continued waving even as she was seated in a wheelchair. All this illness was disturbing, or perhaps it was the parading around of illness that unsettled her. The looks on the patients’ faces bothered her most, hope etched there for everyone to see: to be that gullible and to wear it like a badge.

The unloading was strangely silent, save for the train, which hissed and coughed like a living thing. The stationmaster appeared and helped with an old man in a wheelchair, his head nodding forward, and they lifted him with such gentle, practiced strength that when the wheels of his chair touched the ground, his head did not bob at all. She was afraid that he would freeze, that he would awaken frightened and disoriented, but he slept on as a nun tucked a blanket under his chin and rolled him away. Something about him made her think of Papi, and she felt a thickness in her throat.

She peered down the road again, hoping for a flash of headlights, but there were only the huddled forms of pilgrims receding into the night, the push of the wind and the sounds of footfalls and hundreds of small wheels on uneven pavement. Beyond the station lights there were only the cold and the dark and the village holding its miracles close now under falling snow.

Just last night her great-aunt Mireille had said she’d once come to Lourdes. “We all went, the whole family, to pray for our brother Jules, who died of tuberculosis later,” she said.

Etienne nodded and added that the foothills had been covered in snow. “Jules said that when the nuns lifted him out of the pool, he was completely dry. Can you imagine!” Etienne exclaimed. “Instantly dry!” He snapped his fingers.

They were eating turkey breast, slightly burnt because Mireille had cataracts. It didn’t seem to matter to Mireille or Etienne that their brother had died anyway, that no prayers had saved him. Their grandniece chewed and listened, waiting for some hint of the anger, the stunned cacophony that had filled her when Papi had slumped over the table, staining his three-piece suit.

“I didn’t go into the pool because I was afraid of the water,” Mireille said. “I can’t swim, you see.”

“Though she would have floated, round as she was then,” Etienne said with a wink.

“Don’t listen to him,” Mireille countered. “The nuns had to pull him out by the scruff of his neck.”

“But he died anyway,” their grandniece interjected, annoyed all of a sudden by their joking, even as she was embarrassed by her own rudeness. “Don’t you see that there are no miracles?”

Mireille and Etienne turned to her, their smiles drooping. “Of course, chérie,” Mireille said. “But, all the same, there are always good parts, my darling. Always.”

“Like how Mireille looked like a bag of wool in her dreadful bathing costume!” Etienne said.

Mireille laughed so hard tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. When she’d stopped, she blotted her cheeks and changed the subject. “Here is one thing we wanted to tell you: your papi was very content to live with you, you know.”

She hadn’t known. Not really. All the yelling in the house, and the children making messes, and her angry husband. She hadn’t known at all.

“Oh, yes,” Mireille said. “No one wanted to take him because his mind had wandered. But you took him in, chérie, and he was very pleased. He wrote to us, of course. Several times.”

Etienne nodded. “ ‘The snails are satisfactory,’ he wrote that last time, didn’t he, Mireille? ‘But the soufflé is unmatched.’ ” He smiled. “Frédérick always did love his snails.”

“And now Etienne and I are the last. Mon Dieu,” Mireille said, as if the thought were only just occurring to her. “There were twelve of us once, you know.”

There was only wonder in their voices, and calm. When she washed the dishes in the middle of the night, she envied her great-aunt, who did not seem bitter. She scrubbed and scrubbed, but the turkey pan did not come clean.

Now, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a girl in a light-blue coat holding a nun’s sleeve as they walked away from the train. They moved beyond the light of the platform, and the nun’s habit blended into the darkness, but the girl’s coat and her pale hair held the light a moment longer. She watched the spot where they had been even after the night engulfed them.

Sometime after the train pulled away the stationmaster stepped out of his office and called, “That was the last train, madame.”

Her watch read 10:30. She swallowed, pushed down thoughts of the children, of something having happened to them. It did not occur to her to wonder if something had happened to her husband. She was freezing. Where was he? She collected her valise and the bag of gifts but did not know where to go with them.

“Is someone coming for you?” the stationmaster asked.

“Oh, yes,” she said.

He nodded and returned to his office, but several minutes later she heard his voice again. “Madame, would you like to come inside?”

“Perhaps I should,” she said, and she started toward the waiting-room door.

The stationmaster called out, “It’s locked. You’ll have to come in the office.” He stepped out to hold the door for her.

Inside, the warm air was stifling, and she was already sorry she’d accepted his invitation. She was too tired to carry his kindness on top of everything else. She stood in the middle of the space, feeling lonelier than she had out on the platform, fatigue slipping into her and settling near her breastbone. It took her a moment to realize he was talking.

“The thing about the Lourdes station is that it gets a number of trains,” he was saying. “We have twenty-four trains a day — twenty-four trains that stop, that is, which is quite a lot, all the same, for a town of this size.”

She nodded. His voice filled the office and distracted her as she started to feel her fingers again. She shouldn’t be here at all, she thought. She was not the kind of person who was abandoned at train stations.

Of course they had so many trains because of the grotto and the basilica, he was saying. Did she know that Lourdes had the most hotel rooms of any city in France except for Paris? “At last count there were 414,” he said.

She shook her head. Much later she would wonder why she hadn’t interrupted him and asked for the name of an inexpensive hotel. But there were the children to consider. A mother did not abandon her children, and she was a good mother.

“A woman waiting alone in the cold for so long gets noticed,” the stationmaster was saying. “It’s not normal to be outside in this weather, madame,” he said, “especially in your condition, if you don’t mind my saying.” He shifted from foot to foot, clearly not used to talking so much. “It’s eight degrees below freezing,” he said. He consulted his watch.

His words stung her, as if it were her fault she was in his office after the last train, keeping him from his warm bed. Maybe it was her fault. She didn’t know. She was tired. She needed a bathroom. She wanted to be alone.

Instead she put on her best smile, the practiced one that warned people not to make too many assumptions about her private life, and asked to use the telephone.

She didn’t know what she would say to her husband if he answered. She wanted it to be something sharp, but that would be inappropriate with the stationmaster looking on. She couldn’t make a scene in his office. She decided to give her husband the benefit of the doubt and assume that he had not left her here by choice. She wanted to believe he was not that kind of person.

She dialed the number and waited.

After six rings her husband picked up, but he didn’t say anything.

“It’s me,” she said. She was trembling but told herself it was just the cold wearing off. She turned a little so the stationmaster couldn’t see her face. “I’m at the station.” She didn’t add, My train arrived two hours ago. She didn’t add, Where are you?

“And?” he said.

“And I’m waiting,” she said.

“You got yourself into this,” he said. “Get yourself out.” Then he hung up.

She held the phone to her ear as if it might tell her something sensible, but there was only the dial tone. She turned back to the stationmaster.

“I’m afraid I was disconnected,” she said, giggling. She always giggled when she was nervous.

“Please, please,” he said. He gestured for her to try again, even stepped out this time to allow her some privacy, though she had seen all she needed to see in his eyes.

She was surprised when her husband answered the second time. Now she was the silent one. Finally he said, “The train wasn’t there.”

“So you did come?” she asked, her relief turning to confusion. “And you left again? Didn’t you check?” Of course he didn’t check to see if there was a delay. Of course not.

“The damn train wasn’t there,” he said.

She felt him getting ready to hang up again. “Don’t hang up,” she said in the voice she would use to speak to a disobedient child. “Are the children asleep?” she asked.

“How should I know?” he said, and she realized he hadn’t yet brought them home.

“You need to come back,” she said. Don’t beg, she told herself. There was a very real possibility he would leave her there just to prove something.

“I’m not driving back to the damn station tonight,” he said. “The roads are freezing.”

“It’s not my fault you didn’t check. What, did you think I’d left you?” she asked, a poor attempt at a joke.

There was a silence, and then he hung up. She had no way of knowing what would happen, but she smiled for the stationmaster when he walked back in with snow in his hair. “It was the carburetor!” she said in her bright voice. “But he’s borrowed a friend’s car. He’s on his way now.”

The stationmaster invited her to wait in the office. He offered to make coffee. He tried to make small talk. She declined all of it.

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “It’s late, and my husband will be here any minute.” She tried to hand him two francs for the calls, but he refused them.

Compliments of the railway, he said, tipping his hat. He tried again to make her stay inside, but she pushed right past him.

“Oh, no,” she said. “It’s a question of minutes, really! You mustn’t wait around.” She stood at her full height under the lamp in the dancing snow, valise in one hand, bag of gifts in the other, feeling the warmth of the office being whipped away in the wind, the familiar chill returning to her hands, her feet, her neck. The stationmaster stood with her for several minutes until she told him, in the same voice she had used with her husband, “Please go home.” He was too young to know how to counter her insistence with his own, so she pressed her advantage until he relented and left her alone at last, holding her small universe and the fragments of her pride together. Her husband was a long time coming.

It was nearly midnight when she heard the car’s engine in the distance.

When she looks back on that night, the stationmaster watching as she dialed her husband, she wonders why she bothered. And she wonders: What if she’d never called? How long would it have taken him to come? A day? Two? Would he have notified the gendarmes of her disappearance? She would like to know if he was capable of feeling guilt, or if his world revolved so completely around himself that a late train absolved him of all responsibility.

But she did call. She can’t change that. There were the children to think about, and the baby. What other choice did she have, really? It was a different time. C’est comme ça. Such is life.

Sometimes, at odd moments, she plays the night over in her mind, as if by repetition she might understand it better. Her stomach knots even now at the memory of the concrete platform, the cold settling in her feet, how she stood there after the stationmaster went home, not knowing if her husband would arrive, not knowing anything. The night a vast emptiness. Rage rising inside her like another kind of cold.

At the time all she knew was to wait. She was stupid like that. But she knows now — it has taken her thirty years to learn it — that things might have gone differently. Because her nights are always long and devoid of sleep, she has begun to allow herself to change her memories, to tinker, because it hurts no one and because it is so much better to do this than to endure her mind’s usual racing.

The first time, she imagined herself dying on the platform and her husband finding her frozen beside her valise and the bag of gifts. She tried to find remorse in his face as he picked up her body and carried it to the car, the bottle of wine slipping and exploding at his feet and him cursing the stains. But this was pointless. She knows that if she had died, he would have twisted the facts to prove his point, which had something to do with the price of her frivolity and putting on airs and abandoning her family, something about her being a “shitty mother,” to use his expression. Even now when she listens to his nighttime breathing, she tastes in her throat the old terror that she would die, that the baby would die, and that he would let them. She wonders if he wanted this, if he, too, was exhausted by it all. But she is growing tired of spite, her body abraded by so many years of it. Even her husband’s snores are like sandpaper, wearing her down.

These first imaginings were unsatisfactory, so she allowed herself to invent new ones. Sometimes she saw herself setting off on foot toward home, forty kilometers before her like a penance. She could have made it, knows it would have been physically possible, the way mothers can lift cars off their crushed children. She liked this idea the first time it occurred to her, the strength of it, but she does not like it now, because the children have turned out so much like their father, and they would twist this pilgrimage into a joke to tell at family gatherings to embarrass her. And what would her walking have proven to her husband except that she did not need him to drive her anywhere at all, not even to the grocery, her strength transformed into punishment.

She was always the simple one. She knows this. Her brothers and sisters were smarter, had better imaginations, greater potential. She has always depended on others, or on some vague notion of duty, to tell her what to do. But in the middle of the night, more frequently now, she surprises herself with visions that seem much closer to what she imagines a smarter person having, visions of something like self-sufficiency, an independence she has never felt before.

She loves these fantasies, doesn’t mind the missed sleep, doesn’t mind the repetition. She even tries to still her mind, to focus and find herself again on the platform, the stationmaster gone at last. In her vision she thinks to herself, This is enough, and she collects her things and walks out into the night in the direction she saw the nuns go. She knocks on the convent gate and sounds the bell. She doesn’t give up until the lights flicker and a sister answers, rubbing sleep from her eyes. The nun will not refuse her, not on a night like this, with the snow plastering them both white. The sister leads her to a large dormitory where people are sleeping, the room warmed by their breathing, and gives her a bed next to the girl with the blue coat.

When the nun has gone, she leans close to the girl and whispers, “Why are you here, little one?” but she says this very softly, so the girl will not awaken. Then she tucks the blankets tight and smooths the child’s hair, and though she does not pray, this watching is something like prayer, because she is not doing it for herself. In a way it is better than prayer, because she does not need words for it. She stays like this all night, and the girl sleeps without stirring, her breathing soft and even. Sometimes her imagined self falls asleep even though her real self is still wide awake. Just imagining sleep helps her feel rested in the morning.

This is the vision she looks forward to tonight, a night so hot that sleep is impossible. Outside, a summer storm creates steam, making the house a sauna. Her husband has not yet come to bed. He is watching old westerns on late-night television; the sound of saloon fights ricochets off the walls.

She stretches out in the humid bedroom and tries to imagine the train station that night, hoping the memory of cold will cool her a little now. Her eyes are open in the dark, but she sees herself waiting and waiting, the chill settling into her deeper and deeper, the baby agitated, kicking and tumbling. She feels the terror of her own human inadequacy and knows she must do something. She sees herself pick up her valise and the bag of gifts, but instead of walking to the convent, she walks in the direction of the distant basilica and the grotto, where the Virgin once appeared and the holy spring never freezes.

She has never imagined this before. She shifts slightly on the bed as she pictures the black rock rippling with water sounds and the light of many candles. A woman in a white dress is waiting for her, the fingers of her outstretched hand blue with cold. The woman guides her up the step, helps her make a seat of her valise, and then begins to pull the candles closer. She takes some out of their holders and dribbles wax on the floor and on the walls so she can affix them all around. The woman builds her a shelter of flickering candles, their wax pooling warm around her feet like the sand at the beaches of Larache, where Papi took her when she was a child; their wax dripping down from above, like desert rain on her hair.

She wants to thank the woman for her kindness and unwraps the cheese her great-aunt gave her. She breaks off pieces to eat and share, though it tastes like any cheese now, doesn’t fill her mouth like before. The woman brings a cup of water for her to drink, and in exchange she places the bottle of wine in the woman’s hands. The woman sets the bottle on the altar but does not open it, though it would have been nice to have a drink, just the two of them.

“Please,” she says to the woman, who steps close to the shelter of candles again. She reaches for those cold hands and places them on her belly, where the baby is kicking, hoping to warm them. The woman smiles. After a time she takes her hands away.

The candle flames are bright perforations in the darkness. She wants to speak, but the woman motions for her to be silent, to rest. Then the woman steps to the edge of her grotto, her back to the shelter of candles. She is hard to see through the dancing flames, an impression of white and blue beyond the warmth. She stands there on the cusp of the world and keeps it all at bay, the dark and the uncertainty and the unending cold. She keeps watch, asks nothing in return.

Inside the lattice of candles, the shelter of other people’s devotions, she is surprised to find herself thinking of the morning of the day Papi died. It is a memory she has avoided, because her anger at losing him is still raw. She thinks also of Mireille and Etienne. What was it that Grand-Tante Mireille had said? There are always good parts. And even though there was nothing good — nothing — about the day Papi died, she decides to trust her great-aunt and allow this memory a small space.

That morning Papi arrived with arms full of dandelion greens. He was a sight, dropping leaves and tracking mud across the floor she had just washed, the kitchen still reeking of bleach. His white hair was mussed, and even from across the room she could smell the tang of fresh-turned fields on him.

“Careful, Papi!” she’d said. “The floor is drying!” She wishes she hadn’t been annoyed.

“Voilà!” Papi flourished his arms like a magician, and dandelion greens tumbled to the table. He had flowers in his lapel: one bright dandelion and an early orange poppy. And again a pang, because she was merely patient with him that morning, not delighted. She wishes she’d been delighted like he was, flush from his walk and carrying treasures. Instead she was thinking of the grocery list and how she needed to call the doctor about her daughter’s cough.

All the same she spread the greens on the table to sort them. She smashed the insects already crawling from the pile. She was thinking she would have to soak the greens in vinegar two or three times to kill everything.

“There is nothing better than a dandelion salad, ma chérie,” he said. “Nothing better.”

She noticed a stray leaf in his hair and picked it free. “Oops!” she said, and he smiled.

She took the leaves to the sink and washed them, and Papi stood beside her for a moment, humming. “Nothing better,” he said, and he patted his vest pocket, where his watch kept the time.

“Papi,” she said, and he turned to her, his face cheerful and blank. She made hers a mirror of his. “What would you like with the salad?”

He closed his eyes as he considered. Finally he said, “The best thing with dandelion salad is lapin à la moutarde,” rabbit with mustard.

Sometimes, she smiles as she remembers, he requested outrageous things — strangled songbirds once — or dishes from his childhood that required old techniques and special utensils. She always tried her best. Each time she set a plate before him, Papi smiled and inhaled deeply. “Good,” he would whisper. It didn’t matter if the soufflé had fallen, because he was eating the memory of other soufflés. So long as she listened carefully and caught the essence of his fancy, it was impossible to be a failure. For that she adored him, and she realizes now that his small and absentminded kindnesses sustained her. They might sustain her even now in this sweltering house as John Wayne’s dubbed voice echoes from the salon, where her husband slumbers in his easy chair; as her children live their lives elsewhere and hold her responsible for everything.

Mireille said, “Your papi was very content to live with you, you know.” Everyone says things like this to the grieving, but she would like to believe it. She would like to think that perhaps Papi was content, and that perhaps some part of his contentment was her doing. This small allowance changes things, makes losing Papi a little easier to bear. She feels something shift inside her, something subtle and tentative, like a first step on unfamiliar ice.

All the same, there are no miracles. There are no trumpets, no fanfares, no absolutions. But she sees now that there are brief moments of, if not goodness, then kindness: a thoughtful gesture, a friendly word, an absence of anger now and again. And it hardly matters whether these moments are real or imagined. What matters is the thought of them, each instance small and shining.

The candles flicker in the stillness. The woman faces out toward the darkness, occupied with her thoughts. It is comfortable to sit on the valise in the brightness, the warm wax pooling, crumbs of cheese in her open hands.

Grande-Tante Mireille is long dead now, but in her half sleep her grandniece wishes she could reach across the void and say, I think I understand now. I think I understand.

Christiane Buuck lives in Columbus, Ohio, and though she is not a fan of Buckeye football, she does teach English to some of the football players at the Ohio State University. Her work has appeared in Seneca Review, Crab Orchard Review, and Rock & Sling. Her story is from a novel in progress.