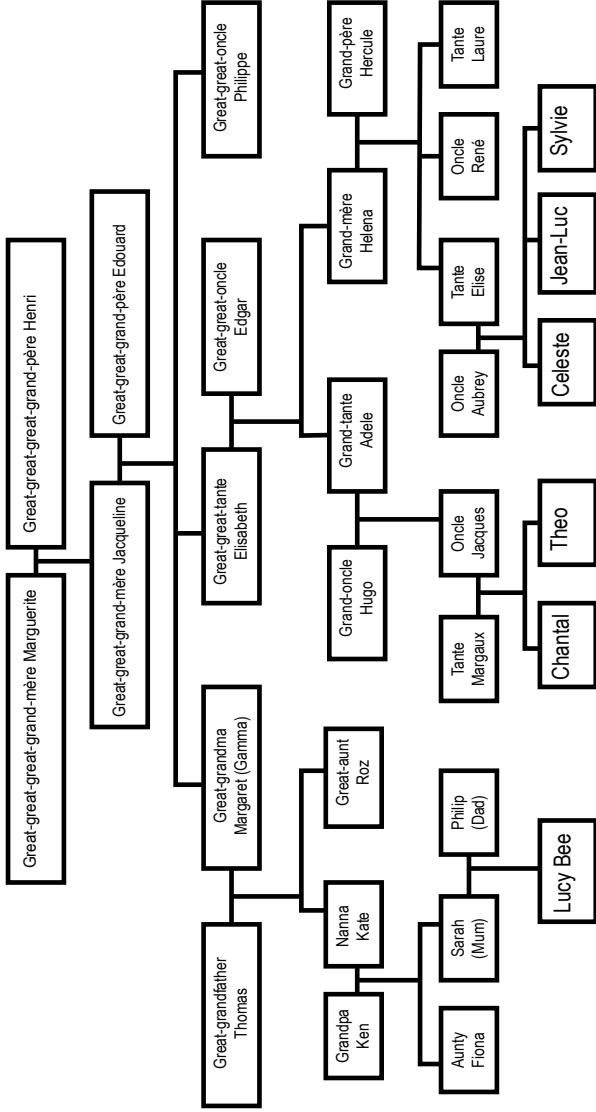


*Bon
jour*
Lucy Bee

ANNE INGRAM



Lucy and Sylvie's Family Tree



One

I woke with something tickling my face. The curtain. I brushed it away. The shutters were open; they must have come loose in the night. Now a sweet-smelling breeze wafted the white filmy curtains back and forth.

A band of sunlight poured across my bed and onto the floor, lighting up the creamy walls. Mum, in the other bed just across from me, was still asleep. She hadn't slept much on the plane. Nor had I really, but I felt wide awake now.

I'd been dreaming. Something about Celeste. She'd been quite rude to Mum and me. Well, not at first. At the train station she'd been nice, waving to us, calling out in a welcoming voice "*Bonjour* Lucy Bee", and "*Bonjour* Sarah" to Mum, kissing us on both cheeks and taking our luggage.

It was in the car that I really went off her. We passed a group of young men, walking along the road in single file. Celeste muttered something at them. It didn't sound very complimentary. When I looked back at them, I saw they were boys, not much older than me, their heads down, slightly averted as if they didn't want to be seen. With their dark hair and olive skin they looked foreign.

"Who are they?" I asked.

Celeste tut-tutted. “Illegal immigrants.”

“Refugees?”

“Whatever they are, they’re in France illegally.”

“But if they’re refugees aren’t they allowed to come in? Won’t France take them?”

“Genuine refugees, yes. If they risk death in their own country.”

“Like Syria where the cities are being bombed?”

“Yes, but those boys look as though they’re from Turkey or Afghanistan. They’re just looking for a better life than they have in their own country.”

“Where will they go?”

Celeste shrugged. “Who knows? Some big city where they’ll soon vanish, or they might try to get to England. Many do.”

I thought how far away Turkey and Afghanistan were. “How did they get here, all this way?”

“Smugglers. Then they come across the borders in trucks. Sometimes they pay the driver. If it’s a gang of them, they might threaten a driver, panic him into taking them.”

“They must be desperate to do that,” I said.

Celeste didn’t answer.

I thought of the pictures I’d seen online, of thousands of refugees waiting behind fences at railway stations, frantic to be allowed to go to Germany, Sweden or other European countries. Of the overloaded boats that crossed the Mediterranean, carrying their cargo of refugees. Of those who didn’t make it, who drowned in capsized boats.

Mum coughed loudly, then said, “*Nous sommes si heureuses être ici,*” which I translated to mean ‘We are so happy to be here’.

Celeste, waving her arm dismissively, said, “Oh why don’t you just speak English? It’s easier for all of us.”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Mum said hesitantly, “especially when your English is so good.”

“It has to be for my job.” Celeste accelerated as the lights changed to green. She drove fast.

Poor Mum, she’d been practising with her French tapes ever since we’d decided to come. My body stiffened. “What do you *do*, Celeste?” I asked.

Mum flashed me a warning look.

“I’m marketing manager for Domaine Guy Jauré. I travel to England and through Europe promoting our wine, so I need to speak English as well as German, Dutch and Italian.”

“That’s really remarkable, Celeste,” Mum said.

Celeste shook her head. Her glossy long black hair bounced around her face. “Not really,” she said. “Most educated French people speak several languages. Don’t you?”

“Regrettably none,” Mum replied. “A few words of Maori only.”

“Perhaps there’s no need, living where you do, at the bottom of the world.”

“Perhaps,” said Mum.

“Have you ever *been* to New Zealand?” I asked.

“No, actually,” she said. “Perhaps one day I will.”

I wanted to tell her Mum and I were both learning French. I didn't, certain she'd wave her hand at me, too, and advise me not to bother.

Seeing those boys walking along the road had really riled her. She was driving far too fast. The car skidded around a corner as we turned off the main road and into a narrow lane that wound down a slope covered with rows of grapevines.

"Is that your vineyard, where you work?" Mum asked, her voice light as though we were all best friends.

"No, it's just a small local grower. There are lots around here. This is Burgundy!"

Away to the right, on a slope, I could see a village with orange-tiled rooftops and the spire of a church but Celeste continued down the hill, then slowed and turned onto a gravel road. "Here we are," she said.

Facing us at the end of the short road sat a two-storey grey house with white shutters across the windows sealing the house shut. It looked blind. Oh, please, not here, I thought. It doesn't look very friendly.

Thankfully Celeste turned right halfway along the road, parking beside a small blue car in a large stone garage covered with ivy. We were just opening the doors when suddenly there was a great commotion, dogs barking, a lady throwing her arms around and speaking flat out in French.

"*Bienvenue, bienvenue!* Sarah! *Et la petite* Lucy! Welcome, welcome!" It was Tante Elise. She looked so like Celeste, she

could have been her sister, rather than her mother. She had the same straight, dark hair except it was cut short. The same shaped face, the same brown eyes, the same wide mouth, only hers was smiling hugely.

Beside her stood a girl a bit younger than me – I knew it must be Sylvie. Small and slight, she looked like a ballet dancer in her black tights and bright green top, her hair pulled into a knot on top of her head. She had the kind of face that looked as though she was smiling even when she wasn't.

Standing to one side was a boy, tall, with thick dark hair. Very good looking. Jean-Luc.

I ran my hand over my frizzy corkscrew curls. Whatever would these sleek-haired cousins think of me with my bushy mop? I wished I'd had it cut short before we left home, then at least it wouldn't be so obvious.

Tante Elise hugged us, kissed us on both cheeks, and half in French, half in English apologised for not coming to meet us.

“I must prepare for my guests,” she explained.

At first I thought she meant us, but then she said, “They arrive soon, *une famille*, and two *personnes* also.”

Then I remembered. Tante Elise's house was a sort of small hotel. She had lots of rooms. That's why we could all stay here. Nanna Kate and Gamma too.

I bit my lip. Poor Gamma. She might not be able to come at all now. We nearly didn't come ourselves. I imagined my

great-grandmother in Brisbane where she lived, lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to machines, monitors bleeping, Nanna Kate at her side. It was too upsetting to even think about.

Mum was giving Sylvie a kiss, then Sylvie looked at me and we sort of hugged. Jean-Luc kissed Mum's cheeks and then came over to me. I felt him brush first one cheek then the other. My face was on fire. I quickly bent down to pick up my suitcase and cabin bag.

"I carry it." Jean-Luc put his hand out and took my case from me. He picked up Mum's in his other hand and grinned at me. "Man's work," he said.

"Aubrey, *mon mari*, my husband, he *regrette* he not here, he has to go to *conférence*," Tante said.

We walked up to the house along a white path of crushed stone that crunched under our feet, the dogs dancing up and down beside us. They were woofing quietly now as though talking to us. A big black dog and a tiny white one. I stopped to pat them and of course they licked me and went crazy.

"*Assis Beau! Couché Froul Froul*!" Jean-Luc yelled at them. Instantly, they sat, calmed down.

The house was like a giant doll's house it was so perfect. Three-storeyed, cream-coloured, framed with brown bricks at the corners and trimming the windows. The shutters were brown too, and all the windows were open with boxes of red geraniums underneath.

At the front door more geraniums spilled out from a wooden tub, and bees buzzed noisily along a border of blue lavender spikes. A bell hung down from a metal horse's head. Above it a sign: *Maison du Canal. Chambres d'Hôtes.*

Tante Elise beckoned at us to go in. “*Entrez, entrez, please,*” she said.

Through the open door, shiny tiles the colour of ripe plums led into a wide hall. I could see a dining room at the back of the house, tables and chairs the same dark honey colour as the staircase that climbed up to the next floor.

“Elise, this is lovely – *très jolie,*” Mum said.

“*Merci.* You are *fatiguée,* tired? You want a drink, *peut-être?* I prepare coffee, tea? Lucy, some water, some *jus?*”

I was so hot I just wanted plain water. “*Un verre d'eau, s'il vous plaît,*” I said, concentrating, trying not to feel embarrassed. At least Celeste seemed to have disappeared. So had Jean-Luc. Only Sylvie was there.

Tante Elise clapped her hands. “*Bravo, Lucy!* A glass of water for you.”

“Elise, I have some bad news,” Mum said. She spoke slowly, hoping Tante would understand. “Grandma Margaret had a stroke the night before we left.”

“Stroke? What is stroke?”

Mum took a piece of paper from her handbag. “*Un accident vasculaire cérébral,*” she read.

Tante Elise's smile vanished. She put a hand on Mum's arm. “*Mais, la réunion...*she...she is going to be okay?”

Sylvie sat beside me on the sofa. She looked at me with a little frown, confused about what was going on, so I said, “Gamma, I mean *Grand-mère* Margaret, *est très malade*. You know – very ill.” I didn’t know the word for great-grandma, but I thought she might realise who I meant.

She nodded, and took my hand. She didn’t say anything but her cool hand was comforting.

Tante said something to Sylvie in French. She spoke so fast I couldn’t understand a word.

Sylvie rubbed the back of my hand. “It very sad,” she said.

It was more than sad. It was so unfair. The whole idea of the reunion had come about as a way of celebrating Gamma’s ninetieth birthday. And Gamma had wanted Mum and me to come to France so much she’d insisted on paying for our air tickets. Nanna Kate’s too. “I can’t take my money with me when I go to heaven,” she’d said, a trace of French accent lingering even after speaking English for nearly seventy years. “I want the pleasure of us all being together, and you getting to know your French side of the family.” And now she probably wouldn’t be able to come herself. She might even die.

We had our drinks, the news about Gamma settling over us like a dark cloud, then Tante Elise took us upstairs.

Mum and I are sharing a room on the top floor. Its creamy white walls and pale-blue covers on the beds made it feel nice and cool. The shutters outside the window were closed to keep the sun out, but Sylvie showed me how to hook them

together to stay a little bit open and let in some air. She helped me unpack, putting my clothes in a huge wardrobe Tante called the *armoire*. Then she picked up the book I'd brought to read, and sat in the blue armchair, flicking through the pages.

"The English words – they are so *difficiles*," she said, chewing her lip.

"Well, I bet I couldn't read any of your books either," I said. "I've only been learning French for a few months." I turned to take my toilet bag into the little bathroom and, suddenly dizzy, nearly keeled over. I clutched at the door, thinking I was going to faint.

"It's probably jet lag," Mum said. She pulled back the covers on the bed. "You need to have a rest."

I lay down and must have gone straight to sleep. I missed dinner, slept all night.

Now, leaning out of the window, I reached across to draw in the shutters. Below me, a gravel road ran along the front of the house, next to a wide mown grassy area. Beyond that, a row of trees bordered a sparkling ribbon of water. Boats were tied up alongside the bank. A huge black barge and some smaller white boats, flags fluttering.

"Careful you don't fall." Mum was throwing back her duvet, getting out of bed.

"I must have been asleep for hours and hours," I said.

"You've certainly had a good rest. Do you feel better now?"

"Mmm. I was dreaming about those refugees we saw. Celeste wasn't very nice about them, was she?"

“Well, it’s a big problem. They need somewhere safe to live but people here are worried about them flooding in and changing things too much.”

“Refugees are people too! And five boys aren’t exactly a flood.”

There was a knock on the door. “Are you awake?” It was Celeste. I hoped she’d heard me.

“Come in,” Mum called.

Celeste opened the door. She wore slim-fitting cream pants and a white top. Her hair was twisted up into a topknot. Stylish was the word that flew into my head.

“Maman says breakfast is ready.” Her eyes widened as she took in my crumpled clothes and Mum sitting on her bed, blonde hair in a tangle. I felt hot and sticky. I needed a shower.

“Thanks,” Mum said. “We’re being a bit lazy.”

“Yes. I will see you later; I have to go to work.”

Good, I thought.