Kathy Flann

From *Sit, Speak, Stay*

Chapter Seven
Off-Color

Sit, Speak, Stay is a memoir about love on the run. My dog was the one constant for over a decade, traversing the US and Europe with me, relocating eleven times. No matter where we were, I found many ingenious ways to reject relationships with men, even while she kept bringing them into my life. How could she know I was commitment-phobic? After all, I didn't grasp it myself, didn't grasp how my past might have contributed to my itchy feet.

In this section, Clark and I are in the midst of moving to England. To avoid Britain's six-month rabies quarantine, I have brought her to France, where she stays with Lawrence and Anne, a couple who live on a vineyard. She's in the process of earning a pet passport so she can become "French" because French pets don't have to be quarantined. But six months seems a long time, too long. I'm working a new job in England and flying regularly to the south of France, sometimes hanging out with Lilly, a South African friend of the couple. She's single and in her early thirties, like me, and she smokes and is so fluent in French that she can say curse words exactly right.

Between three and four p.m., everyone in Gaillac, it seemed, would wander to the Café des Sport for an espresso. And once they were there, they might as well have a beer. The weather was usually mild enough, even in winter, to sit at the wicker tables out front on a grassy plaza. The sun would lower in the pink sky, and strings of lights on the beech trees would illuminate tiny glasses of beer, hands waving cigarettes, brows furrowed in debate. The café, dead at three, would buzz until seven, when everyone then wandered off in search of dinner.

There was a sense of timelessness about these rhythms, like the seasons. Here in Gaillac, it didn't feel like 2001, exactly—it didn't seem to matter what year it was. The US invasion of Afghanistan, though geographically closer than it would have been at home, seemed further away. The BBC's 24-hour news channel, the gun-rattling soundtrack of my morning ablutions and bedtime routines back in the UK, often featured random New Yorkers grabbing the mic with their fingerless wool gloves and proclaiming patriotic things—"Support our troops!" or "United we stand!" A Gallup poll said 92% of Americans supported the invasion.

I hadn't been home since the attacks, which still were not known as *9/11*. Friends and family had told me about nation-wide moments of silence, candlelight vigils that illuminated whole towns, mass enlistments in the army. That place seemed so foreign, so far away. I had never lived in that particular America. It was different, like an identical twin with a broken nose.

"Let's stop at the Café des Sport," Lilly would say on the way back to the vineyard from an errand we had run for Anne. Everyone always said the entire name of the place, *Café des Sport*, and never *the café*, even though it was the main café in the village. The *t* in *Sport*, was silent, of course. I thought of it as the Café Day-Spore.

"I need to get back," I'd tell her. If we didn't make it by five, Lawrence would walk the dogs without me. The vineyard would be too dark otherwise. It wasn't a prospect I could bear. Picturing vineyard walks with Clark was getting me through the long weeks of separation.

"Yeah, yeah. Sure," Lilly would say. "Just for a minute."

Since she was the one with a car, I didn't have much choice. I'd nag her every ten minutes, though, usually getting her out of there by four, when most people were still arriving. I was in France to see Clark. Lilly would sigh, shoulders slumped as she pushed her chair back. The party was just starting, and I was making her miss it.

A few people I met at these quick forays to the Café Day-Spore spoke some English, others none at all. While

Lilly held court, I'd often chat with Claude, who arrived daily at three, like it was his job. He used to work as a clerk for Doctors Without Borders, but had been on a health disability for a few years. He was an "Arab," as they called people of middle-eastern descent here, maybe twenty-nine, and looked old, with a boney, shrunken frame. His head was shaven, and his cheeks sunk in. His personality, though, didn't suggest frailty. He liked gossip and fashion and going out. He'd look me up and down, searching for something, anything to pick apart. "Brown corduroy," he'd say, gesturing to my pants. "You're starting to dress badly, like a British person." Always, he'd be grinning. Then, he'd lean close and tell me the dish about each person who arrived. "*He* is having sex with *her*." He'd point from behind his menu.

Sometimes, he'd reveal his own interests, which did not veer toward men, like I'd first thought. His Frenchness had thrown me off. Or maybe it was just the comfort I felt. "She," he'd say, nodding his head toward a girl who'd just arrived, "is pretty, but too skinny." Since Claude was so skinny himself, it was easy to see how this might be a concern. Two skinny people might bruise each other with their sharp elbows and hips and collarbones. It was as close as he ever came to disclosing anything about his health.

I would hear through the grapevine—a metaphor that had taken on new significance here in wine country—that he struggled with an addiction to alcohol, that he'd been in a relationship with a British girl, which was why he spoke English so well, but it had ended when he'd started hitting her.

I never saw any sign of this side of him, though, if it was true. To me, he seemed sad. He'd turn toward a plumper girl at another table. "Her, I like," he'd say with a Gaelic shrug. "Built for cushion, not for speed." He'd grin then, a crack in his melancholy, pleased with himself for saying something provocative, proud the he owned such phrases in English.

One winter evening, we arrived at the Café Day-Spore after Clark's walk instead of before. It was past the halfway point on her six months in France, and I was starting to believe we just might make it. Maybe the walk had been a

particularly nice one—she had fetched the Frisbee with me for half an hour afterward in the yard or I had laced up my running shoes and we'd gone a few miles on the country roads, just the two of us. We did that most days, Clark right beside me. Our feet, our breath would fall into synch, and the rhythm of her blond shoulders released something in me, the burden of thoughts.

Maybe I was also starting to zero in on the route I would take when I brought her to England in March—would it be air, rail, sea? Maybe I was getting more lax with Lilly, as a result. Everything was going to be okay. So sure, yeah, let's stop for a coffee.

The sun was going down. Lilly, Claude, and I sat there with our espressos. And that was when Pascal parked himself at our table. He had thick brown hair and, unlike anyone else, he wore a starched button-down white shirt and a tie. I'd never seen him before, but Lilly and Claude greeted him with the same familiarity as they greeted all the others. *Huh*, I thought, *a job that requires a tie.* I surveyed shop fronts and tiny streets, as if I might find a glass office building I hadn't noticed before. Everyone else had jobs that didn't hinder mid-afternoon drinking—shop clerks, wait staff, bartenders. Quite a few, like Claude, seemed to have no jobs at all. And yet, here was a businessman. It was like seeing a unicorn.

Pascal unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled them up. He loosened the tie. The phrase, "It's Miller time," popped into my head, and I laughed out loud. He hadn't been trying to be funny, but when he saw me laugh, he made an even bigger show of loosening the tie. He wrestled with it like it was attacking him and then took it off entirely and whipped it onto the table.

He settled in and ordered. There were pleasantries in French. People stopped by the table to pat him on the shoulder. Finally, he leaned closer to talk to me, the stranger who found him so entertaining. I knew what he didn't—that I didn't speak much French. It turned out he didn't speak much English. But he had large dark eyes and an expressive face like a silent movie star. A kind of determination washed

over him. It was as if the rolled-up sleeves were for me. "Okay," his face said. "Let's talk. We'll make it happen."

When we did, in moments, fail to communicate, stuttering or falling silent, Claude, who might have seemed engrossed in another conversation, would lean over and translate everything that had just been said. Somehow, maybe because of the way Pascal would lean back and close his eyes and go, "Aaaaah. Oui, oui. Okay," it seemed like we had actually talked, like we had really gotten somewhere.

What brings you to Gaillac? he wanted to know. I couldn't speak well enough to say that I was circumnavigating arcane British quarantine laws. I could say that my dog lived here. *What kind of dog?* A Labrador. "Aaaah, Labrador!" He'd had a dog himself, back when he was married, an Old English Sheepdog. We pieced this together in a mixture of French and English and wild hand gestures. It was like charades. He mimicked combing his dog's hair out if its eyes. Then pretended he *was* the dog, blowing hair off his forehead.

What color is the Labrador? No one had asked me this before, but it was a word I knew. Which was always exciting. "Jaune," I told him. Yellow. I sat back, pleased with myself.

He stopped and looked at me, pursing his lips and furrowing his brow as if something smelled weird. It was an expression I would come to see as very French. "*Jaune?*" He reached over to Claude's sleeve and said something.

Claude turned to me. "Yellow dog? What do you mean you have a yellow dog?" Claude already liked to tease me about the fact that I travelled all these times because of *a dog.* Now they were both laughing. They waved others to the table, regaling them with this news. "Jaune?" I heard more people say.

Finally, the noise of it all reached Lilly. "What's the problem?" she said. Claude explained to her.

Lilly gave a worldly smirk and ashed her cigarette. She turned to me. "They wouldn't call a Labrador *yellow* here. They might say *golden* or *blond.* To call a dog *yellow* would be like saying it was pink or purple." She waved the cigarette while she spoke, and then she explained the translation error I'd made to the waiting crowd. They laughed even harder.

From then on, I was known that way. People always said it in English. I'd be coming down the street and they'd yell out, "Ay, Yellow dog!"

That was me.

Some weeks later, we went out as a foursome one night--Lilly, Claude, Pascal, and me. We ate at a restaurant in Toulouse, the closest big city. Pascal picked out vegetarian items for me from the menu. When the food came, he made fun of my American habit of keeping one hand on my lap, something that my parents had instilled as good manners, but that wasn't very European. He made fun of me in French, but wisecracks still sounded like wisecracks. "He wants to know what you're doing with that hand under the table," said Claude. He wiggled his eyebrows.

"Ha! Wouldn't you like to know?" I said to Pascal via Claude.

After the meal, we ordered coffee, and I asked for a decaf. Pascal threw his hands in the air, nearly falling over backwards. He ranted to Lilly and Claude.

Lilly said, "He says, you don't eat meat, you drink *white* wine. And now decaf!"

Pascal pointed at Lilly, at the translation of his words coming from her mouth. In heavily accented English, he said, "Yes!" He threw his hands to the heavens again. Then, also in English: "Why *live*?"

Later, it would occur to me that the evening had partly been a group of friends out on the town. But it had also partly been a first date with two translators in tow.

Pascal began to visit some afternoons at the vineyard when I was in town, like a suitor who'd come to court. I didn't make myself available often for excursions like the one we'd had to Toulouse, and so here he'd be. He met my "parents"—Lawrence and Anne, who found him charming, and perhaps a tad quaint in his uber-Frenchness. The two of us would walk Clark through the countryside.

For me, normally, the way a person treated Clark was important. But Pascal was the first guy I'd ever dated—or was on the cusp of dating—who spoke a different language, who

was a decade older, who was divorced and had kids, who lived in a different country than I did. Where could this really go? So what did it matter if he was at ease with Clark?

I didn't pay attention to the details of Pascal's first interactions with her. But at some point, he took the Frisbee I'd brought and took off running, fit from all the soccer he played in the evenings. She bounded beside him. The two of them dashed through fields then for the duration of our hour-long hike, played hide-and-seek in the rows and rows of vines. He'd peek out at her like *Boo!* And then she'd rush over there. *Aha!* Both their faces were enraptured. Time had stopped. Nothing existed except this.

Whenever he came over after that, she'd bound over to him, jumping in that way she had with people she especially liked. She'd lift her front feet off the ground and do a light touch to the side of the body, maybe a head graze. She was careful not to push too hard, not to scratch. It was a greeting, a *Hey, I'm glad to see you!* She didn't do that to everyone.

One night, Pascal called and asked, via Lawrence, if I would go to a birthday party for a girl from the village, someone about my age. Clark stared up at me while Lawrence conveyed the message, her dark eyes sparkly in the lamp light, tail wagging, like *What's up?* I felt torn, which made me understand I wanted to go. "She'll be asleep soon anyway," Lawrence said. "Have fun." It was true. Clark liked to go to bed early. She'd often sleep with her head under the bed to block out my night-owl light. And there was something about Pascal. Even though he was an adrenaline junkie who rode a motorcycle—not normally my thing—there was something kind and gentle about the attention he paid, the work he put into communicating. And then also, although I couldn't have articulated it, maybe I liked him because Clark liked him.

The birthday girl's family had rented out a party room in the back of a restaurant. There were generations of people sitting at long tables, little kids and old people. It was nice, I thought, to have so much family in one place. My own was very American in how spread out it was, my extended family thousands of miles away from each other. Plus, there

were other types of distance. My mother's parents had been physically abusive with their kids; her brother was bi-polar; her sister was part-paralyzed from a suicide attempt. My dad's only sibling, a sister, had dropped out of our lives. My sisters, now twelve and fourteen, had never met her, even when my dad flew the family out to California and attempted to visit. So it stirred something to see all of these people together, many with the same dark eyes and curly hair, laughing and eating, their thighs touching at these long benches. One old man kept reaching a fork across the table and spearing a younger guy's cherry tomatoes while he was turned away. Everyone around him howled every time he did it.

When the cake came out, the lights dimmed and a disco ball lowered from the ceiling. People didn't sing Happy Birthday, but some other tune that had a disco beat. Everyone knew the words the way people would for Happy Birthday, and the girl stood on a chair and danced.

After the cake, the girl mingled with her guests. She came over to meet me. I must have been someone special for Pascal to bring me along. She asked me about myself, via Claude, who was also there. I tried to explain how I'd gotten here—the dog, the British quarantine laws, the French passport. Pascal and Claude started cheering, "Yell-ow dog! Yell-ow dog!"

She interrupted, putting up a hand. "Attent." *Wait.* She studied my face. She was a petite girl with brown curls framing her face. "Americaine?"

I nodded, took a sip of my drink. "This is a nice party," I started to say.

She put her palm close to my eyes. "*Americaine?*" she said again, and it was like she might make contact, might press the hand to my forehead and push me backwards.

"Oui," I said, taking a step back.

The girl began a rant in French, eyes fiery. Pascal and Claude moved in between us. "Whoa! Whoa!" they said—or the French equivalent. Her cheeks reddened as she cursed me. A curl stuck to the sheen of sweat on her forehead. Pascal grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to make

eye contact with him. He started talking, his back to me, his voice quiet. The girl finally turned away, but not before giving me a look over his shoulder, muttering a few more choice words. Then she stopped and marched back toward me again, shouting, arms waving, and they held her back again. Claude said, "She wants to know why you're bombing Afghanistan."

"I gathered," I said.

Sometimes people in England, who had been so sympathetic before, now also demanded to know why I was bombing Afghanistan. It was as if, by virtue of being American, I actually was the president. "Look," I'd tell them. "I'm not exactly on daily phone calls with Washington." Then I'd put my ear to my imaginary wristwatch as if it were a Dick Tracy phone. I'd tap it like it was on the fritz. This would elicit a laugh, and then a less confrontational conversation about what was happening could ensue. They could see I was a person who sometimes agreed and sometimes didn't with her government, just like anyone else.

But tonight I had no language with which to defuse the situation, and all I could do was watch the girl walk away. She stood in a huddle with relatives speaking conspiratorially, glancing at me. An old woman, presumably her grandmother, began gesticulating and pointing. Maybe the music didn't literally stop. It seemed like it had.

The party was over, at least for me.

Outside in the parking lot, Claude and Pascal tried to make me feel better. Pascal made gestures and facial expressions that said, *Forget her.* He said, in English, the word he used for so many things. "Okay." He squeezed my hand. "Okay."

Claude said, "She's stupid. She's a stupid, stereotyping idiot."

The girl saw me as a murderer. What kind of stereotype was this exactly? Up to now, the French stereotype I knew about Americans was that we were the "happy idiots." Couldn't we go back to that?

In a way, I was glad it happened, glad to learn how it felt to be pegged as a representative of a whole group and for

that group to be seen as a monolith. After all, my recent news addiction had taught me that people around the world dealt with situations like that on a regular basis—and with far more at stake than birthday cake. And then also, didn't it seem important to see for myself the public relations consequences, as it were, of decisions the US was making? But these thoughts were all abstractions.

In reality, after the birthday party, I stayed even closer to the vineyard with Clark and Lawrence and Anne. Pascal continued to visit, and I continued to like him more. When I did meet new French people, sometimes they mistook me for Irish. I didn't correct them. Which made me feel both disloyal and safe.

It seemed like maybe I wasn't "the yellow dog," like everyone said. The actual yellow dog was fearless, the way she'd leap off river banks or crash through the forest or go right up to every stranger she met.

Clark was a peacemaker, too, the kind of dog who could tell when people were angry, who would go back and forth between them to broker a deal, a worried wrinkle in her forehead, hopeful tail wagging, as if to say *I like you and I also like you. Perhaps you could like each other?*

Stephen E. Smith

A Memory of George Garrett

I was casually paging through my mother's copy of *Mademoiselle* when my attention was drawn to an illustration of a woman diving from a tower, her arms spread wide, her back bowed, toes pointed skyward. Below her waited a flaming cauldron. The opening paragraph of the accompanying short story described posters that had been tacked to telephone poles around a fictional American town in the 1950s: "For several weeks, maybe a month or so, a plump woman in a sequined one-piece bathing suit, poised on a stylized tower which rose into the very clouds, like Jacob's dreamy ladder, with here and there around a few birds in tense swift V's, and below, far, far below, there was a tub, flaming and terrible, into which she was surely going to plunge."

I was 13 years old when I chanced upon George Garrett's "An Evening Performance." At that moment in my life I wasn't in the habit of reading literary short stories in glitzy women's magazines, but a carnival show similar to the one described in Garrett's story had recently visited my Delmarva hometown. I'd missed the performance, so I gave the story a careful read. Before I'd finished the last paragraph, I knew the author was writing about something more than a band of itinerant carnies.

I wasn't sure what that something was, but I was curious enough to stash the issue of *Mademoiselle* in my bureau drawer so I could occasionally reread the passages that puzzled and intrigued me. The plot was straightforward enough, even for a kid, and the description of small-town life dead on—". . . beyond the last glare of filling stations and the winking motels and the brilliant inanity of used-car lots—where, no matter how brightly lit, the rows of cars stood like sad wooden horses from some carousel set out to graze. . . ."—but it was Garrett's ability to convey energy and motion through prose that mostly