

# **WRITING SAMPLES**

MEG DELAGRANGE-BELFON

# A FRENCH LESSON



**Meg Delagrangé-Belfon**

Win Wednesday Series

July 5, 2019

“You ARE French. You don’t know it, but you already are.” My host, Monsieur Maigrot, tells me this in a thick French accent.

Last night we all sat at the table under a huge weeping willow tree in the backyard, just like we do every evening as the sun sets slowly. We ate just as slowly from the table full of food that Monsieur Maigrot had taken hours to prepare in the kitchen.

As we sipped our wine, we listened to his stories about his childhood. He grew up poor. He ate a lot of potatoes and canned fish in oil. And he hated school.

“When I learned English in school, I learned it out of a book, the way I thought it should say the word, you know. My professors, eh, they had never been to America or England so they, too, say it out of the book the way they think it should say, so we all speak, eh, the English that no one else speak. But,

eh, a lot of the words in English are the same in French, just a little different.”

When he was 20 years old, he hitchhiked to the Middle East with 20 euro in his pocket. Once, after he ran out of money, he met a stranger who wrote something in Arabic on a napkin and gave it to him, telling him to show this to anyone and ask whatever he wants. So he did that and he ate for free the rest of his time traveling there. He still doesn’t know what the writing on the napkin said. Now he says he’s too old to travel, so that’s why he loves hosting travelers like my sister and I.

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On Monday morning, my sister and I took a bus from Paris to the countryside of France. Once we arrived in the little town, we met our host for the week. Monsieur Maigrot found us at the station, using hand signals to motion us over to him. He’s 72 years old, with a

head full of white and gray hair, but he's as lively as a man 20 years younger. At first we thought he couldn't speak any English because he was so quiet.

When we arrived at his family's house in the countryside, we knew we had reached a little slice of heaven on earth. The house and studio are surrounded by gardens and willow trees, hemmed in by lush green pastures and rolling hills, stitched with lines of trees and twisting country roads. The house is filled with hundreds of pieces of art, both paintings and ceramics, because Monsieur Maigrot is an artist.

In exchange for hosting us, we help the Maigrot family with their gardening each day for a couple of hours. We always end up doing a lot of talking while we eat the fresh fruit that we pick off of the trees or bushes around us.

On the first day, I trimmed all of the bushes along the cobblestone sidewalk that leads to the studio. I wanted to make sure they were perfect, so I kept going over them to snip off any branches I had missed. Monsieur Maigrot walked over and watched me work.

"I don't much care for perfect. Perfect ruins it."

I stopped working on the bushes and stepped back. We stood there looking down the row of bushes together.

"It's good," he said, and I nodded with a smile. I understood.

"Perfect ruins it." Those simple words echoed in my head for the rest of the day.

How many times have we tried to make everything perfect while missing the beauty of what already exists? How many times have we waited until something was perfect, missing an opportunity for growth or progress?

"Perfect ruins it."

Monsieur Maigrot's statement sounds really similar to a French phrase that I've come to love — "parfait en ruine", meaning "perfect in ruins".

Perhaps the magic of French culture is in its ability to find a natural juxtaposition between chaotic and perfection. Everywhere I go, things are imperfect in an organic, beautiful way. Parfait en ruine. Perfect in ruins.

As a girl, I never liked things to be too clean. Clean, perfect houses always felt

unwelcoming and stifling to my personality. I always felt more comfortable in the middle of clutter. I loved the artistic look of a loose stack of books and uneven, knotted rugs, and strange colorful art. I never cared for perfection, but I never knew it was “French” to dislike perfection. \*insert a wink\*

As an adult, I’ve been conditioned to strive for perfection. Without perfection, no one measures up. It seems like nothing is ever good enough unless it can be made perfect. It feels like you’re never going to measure up to the person who has the “perfect” life and the “perfect” manners.

Perhaps, it’s time to get go of the goal of perfection and enjoy life as it happens — both as we create imperfectly and receive its imperfect creations.

Less perfect, more living.

Less perfect, less frustration. Less perfect, less resentment. Less perfect, less jealousy. Less perfect, less micromanaging.

Less perfect, more authenticity. Less perfect, more wild and free. Less perfect, more gutsy and true to what really matters. Less perfect, more kind. Less perfect, more organic progress. Less perfect, more joy.

It’s not about not trying at all. It’s not about apathy. It’s not about shrugging off our responsibilities. It’s about really embracing life and growing right where we are. It’s about tuning our hearts to see and appreciate all the good in every living moment. Because in every moment of gratitude, we come into a fullness of living, lacking nothing.

So today, when the coffee burns your tongue, or the meeting runs late, or dinner doesn’t turn out right, just say to yourself in your best thick French accent, “Eh. I don’t much care for perfect. Perfect ruins it.”

And remember, you ARE French.

# YOU'RE ALREADY WINNING



**Meg Delagrang-Belfon**

Win Wednesday Series

April 22, 2020

My sister cut an orange into perfect wedges before she brought it to the table. I noticed how the morning light shone through the vibrant flesh of the oranges. She giggled and told my daughter and I how she won a game on her phone after four hours of playing it during an international flight. For some reason, we found that so funny that we all laughed really hard.

Time together. Win. Fresh fruit to enjoy. Win. Laughing together. Another win.

My dryer is broken, so I drove to the laundromat to dry my laundry. While I sat there, I had time to reflect and write, time that I might not have otherwise paused in the middle of the day. Win. When I pulled my warm fluffy laundry out of the commercial dryer, I noticed a wispy tale of pink and purple yarn that

my daughter tied to the handle of the laundry basket. I smiled. Even here, her little creative antics were making me smile. The piece of yarn bounced in the air every time I pulled more laundry out of the dryer and dropped it into the basket. I was smiling. I was winning.

Later I drove down the road, headed for home, my tongue digging at a piece of lettuce stuck in my teeth after I finished eating a cheap taco from Taco Bell. That taco hit the spot. Maybe it's the best \$1 I've ever spent. It was the first time in over two weeks that I ordered food to eat. I was winning.

This journey all started with counting our smallest wins on a Wednesday morning.

Didn't spill your coffee? Win. Spilled the coffee and then laughed about it?

Win. Got out of bed the first time your alarm went off? Win. Got to spend an extra hour in bed? Win.

Do you see what's happening? You're always winning.

Nothing's a competition here. Nothing is a comparison to another win that might somehow be better. No, your win is your win and it matters! Discovering a good thing is a win. Finding the good thing in the hard thing is a win. Everything is a win.

The moment I let a sense of lack creep into my thinking, I start comparing myself to someone else. I start competing. I start trying to protect myself.

Can you relate?

Counting your smallest wins and living in a way where you make them important almost seems too simple. Childish even, maybe. But when I choose to live this way, it changes everything.

These tiny wins simply remind you that you're still alive and your story isn't over yet.

Choose to win.

Get captivated by the tiniest wins today

and celebrate them like you just experienced a lovely, outdoor Parisian dinner in a clearing of trees, while the sun was setting, with a couple of dear friends.

# HELLO FEAR



**Meg Delagrang-Belfon**

Ghost Writer, Plain Anna

January-July, 2020

I met fear for the first time on the long, hard benches at *gma*, Sunday church. Mom had pinched my legs hard, so I sat rigidly still and listened to the prediger, the Amish preacher. His watery eyes nearly popped behind his thick bifocals as he preached about a terrifying *Gott in Himmel* from the schrift.

With as much zeal as his preaching, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a long white handkerchief to wipe the perspiration from his forehead. He was preaching so hard that a bit of foam started forming at the corners of his mouth, above his beard. He wiped that away too, momentarily, with the same white handkerchief before shoving it back into his *lots hussa*.

*Gott in Himmel*. Just the thought of that stern God glaring down from the heavens made me quiver, especially when I was alone.

Gott remembered every sin I had ever

committed. The fear of Gott convinced me that I was irretrievably broken and unpardonable forever. I could not be cleansed. I could not be saved. I was doomed.

Perhaps, Mom had told me, the angels might let me into Himmel if I was good enough.

I met fear again on a dark night when I was seven years old. Mom was shaking me awake in my bed.

“Anna. Anna, *wach auff*.”

What was wrong? Why was Mom standing beside my bed?

“Anna, Anna, wake up. Uncle Joe’s house is on fire.” She made me get up.

I followed Mom downstairs and found the rest of my siblings huddled in front of the living room window. Standing on my tiptoes, I tried to see what they were

looking at. In the distance, I could see a big ball of light. My uncle's house was on fire, Mom had said.

My sister Josephine started crying.

My cousin Betty's husband, Freeman, burst through the door, carrying his small baby into the house. "Somebody take the baby," he cried. "Quick! I have to go get Betty out of the house. I thought she was here, right behind me, but she's not!" Mom grabbed baby Andrew from Freeman's arms before he hurried back out.

Cousin Betty and Freeman lived at Uncle Joe's house, too. When they got married, they didn't have enough money saved up to buy a farm of their own so they lived with Betty's parents. This was not an uncommon situation for Amish families when I was growing up.

Since Amish youth give all of their wages to their mom and dad until they are twenty-one years old and many of them get married in their early twenties, not having enough money for a house of their own is common. So multiple generations of related family members often live together on the same homestead. Typically, the elderly parents live in a small house apart from the main

house. It's usually called the Dawdy Haus.

On that fateful night, terror struck the hearts of each person in our family as we watched Uncle Joe's house burn.

Freeman, filled with adrenaline, literally climbed up the side of their house to find my cousin Betty in the burning house. Once he got into the upstairs window, he searched for his young wife. He couldn't find her.

The strength of the smoke and heat almost overcame him, so he had to go back out of the window. Uncle Joe helped him get down before they kept searching for the women who were still inside the burning house.

My single Aunt Leah, Uncle Joe's sister, also lived in the house. Her bedroom was in the back south corner of the house. Uncle Joe went around the house and knocked on her window to wake her up. Yelling against the glass, he tried to explain to her that the house was burning. He motioned for her to come over to the window so he could help her get out.

Confused, she got out of bed, but instead of coming to him, she went to



her bedroom door, which opened into the living room. Perhaps she could hear Betty screaming. We'll never know.

The last thing any of us heard from Aunt Leah was her blood-curdling scream. She threw her hand over her mouth before running into the living room.

The next day, we found her body lying next to the body of my cousin Betty.

It was a nightmare that I just wanted to wake up from. Filled with fear, we cried and hugged each other that night, trying to absorb the horrible truth that our minds simply could not comprehend. It was an unbelievable tragedy to lose two loved ones in one night.

I stood by the window with my siblings all night as we stared across the field and watched Uncle Joe's house burn down. How could this be happening? We continued watching as the fire trucks finally came. But it was too late. Nothing could be done to save Aunt Leah and Cousin Betty.

Aunt Leah was my favorite aunt, and Betty was my favorite cousin. They just could not be dead. No. I didn't want to believe any of it. My seven-year-old brain couldn't process what this meant.

Death. It was so final. So cold. From the moment I met Death, it made me feel helpless and alone.

I was in shock. I was afraid. Would Gott in Himmel send the fire to our house to punish us?

But it wasn't God who struck fire to Uncle Joe's house. It was a resentful, troubled young man from our church, where Uncle Joe was the bishop. Since Uncle Joe wouldn't change the rules of the Ordnung to allow modern farming equipment, some men were very angry. Angry enough to kill.

The police investigated and found evidence that someone had started the fire on the back porch of Uncle Joe's house. Additionally, they found tire tracks between the south of the farm and the road. Since we used horses and buggies, not cars, clearly, the young man had parked a borrowed car there. All of the evidence was pointing to him as the arsonist, the murderer of my beloved aunt and cousin.

Before the investigation could go any further, Uncle Joe refused to press charges. After all, we were Amish, and he was the bishop. As Amish, we were passivists. We wouldn't defend ourselves. We wouldn't go to war. We

wouldn't take anyone to court. Because of this, he wouldn't press charges and no one would cooperate with the murder investigation.

And so, the case was dropped.

# THE TWO FORGOTTEN PUPS



**Meg Delagrange-Belfon**

Buddy, a Children's Book

July, 2022

Flash! Flash! CRACK!

Flashes of light shot through the dark night sky. The trees along the forest edge stood very still, like they were waiting for something to happen, or maybe they were hiding something.

Lightning struck again, illuminating a small farm and its tiny house. Behind it, hiding in the shadows, was an old barn that looked deserted.

Between the house and the barn stood a lone tree under which two puppies were huddled together. They were tied to the base of the tree with chains.

Whenever the thunder cracked, sounding like a deafening BOOM! the smaller pup let out a frightened “Yelp!”

“I don’t like that loud sound,” he whimpered. “Or the bright lights! It makes

my head hurt.”

His big brother, who was also afraid but decided to be brave for his smaller sibling, moved closer to him to provide comfort. He said, “There, there, it’ll be alright. Just stay close to me.”

The two puppies didn’t have names because no one wanted them. Soon after they were born, the farmer tied them to the tree, and left them there. Every so often he threw some scraps of food their way. Their only shelter was a piece of plywood leaning against the tree.

*At least we have each other,* the smaller pup thought to himself. He cuddled closer to his big brother, which he often did on such nights, since it was cold and dreary.

When morning finally came, the puppies stretched as the sun slipped in

from behind the trees, reaching down to warm them with its bright rays of light. Both dogs wagged their tails with happiness because the storm was over.

On this particular day, the puppies were going to meet a new human named Jeff. Jeff lived in the next town over, where his family owned a grain mill that supplied local farms with grain and feed for their livestock.

Summer break had just begun and that made Jeff happy because he loved spending time with his dad. He hopped into his dad's truck as they left to make their delivery.

But when they pulled into the long driveway, Jeff saw the puppies under the tree.

As soon as they stopped, Jeff got out of the truck and ran over to where the puppies were. He could tell they had been tied up for a while. They looked dirty, hungry, and very, very sad. The scene pulled at Jeff's heartstrings. It seemed as if they were begging for a place to belong and for someone to take care of them.

Jeff had always wanted a dog. It didn't seem right for these two puppies to be tied to a tree. He watched them play with each other, tumbling around in the

dirt. Then he got an idea. Maybe, just maybe, the farmer would let him adopt the puppies and give them a new home.