

LESLEY QUINN



AT A LOSS FOR WORDS

AFTER ALMOST FIVE WEEKS OF SUSTAINED CLUELESSNESS, my ability to remain cheerful in the face of continuing humiliation was wearing thin, and how comforting it was to realize English would soon be the default language. My thirteen-year-old daughter, Molly, and I had only to cope with French for another hour.

Every year at the beginning of August, the inhabitants of Paris abandon their city in huge flocks, like migrating birds, for the entire month. I knew this—everyone knows this—but I wasn't prepared for the scene that awaited us at the airport. Out of the taxi, with stuffed shopping bags atop a rolling suitcase for every available hand, Molly and I stepped directly into an ocean of Parisians. People stood shoulder-to-shoulder, hundreds deep, in purposeful but, to us, entirely baffling formations. Polite questions in English were met with irritated discharges of cigarette smoke, and the usual impenetrable French. I'd have started whimpering myself if my hyper-anxious daughter hadn't beaten me to it. "Mom, where are we supposed to *go*?"

"Let's try this one," I said, stepping into line behind a heavily perfumed older woman in zebra mules. Right away I felt a vigorous tap on my shoulder and beheld a hostile forefinger pointing to a far end of the terminal where, I now understood, I'd find the end of the line.

After we had rid ourselves of all but our unwieldy carry-on bags, we fought our way to the remote departure gate where, I figured, I'd find a place to buy a book written in English. But after walking what seemed at least five miles along a series of movable sidewalks, what I found was one useless duty free cosmetics shop.

Uh oh. Not even with pharmaceutical assistance could I survive the next seventeen hours of airplane travel without a book.

We were to board in thirty minutes. I had to make a quick decision. If Molly and I both returned to the main terminal, with our ludicrous carry-on luggage and our shredded

shopping bags, we'd have to wait in the long security line a second time. Clearly, we'd never make it.

I took a deep breath. "Listen Molly," I began in my most Mary Poppins voice. "You're going to wait here with our stuff, okay? I'm just going to run back and grab a book. Real quick."

"What?" she said, all the blood draining from her face.

"It'll be fine," I assured her calmly. "We'll find a nice person for you to wait with."

"No way, Mom."

"You are thirteen years old now—you are practically an adult, Molly. You can do this, really, you can. It's time to grow up! I'll be right back. Fifteen minutes, max."

"No," she said firmly. "Absolutely not. What if the plane leaves without you? I'm sticking with you. That's just the way it is, Mom. I'm very sorry."

"Listen, I hissed. "I must find a book! I'm begging you. Look at my eyes. Can't you see that I will go *insane* if I don't have a book? There isn't time for us to schlep all these bags all the way back to the bookstore. I will—"

"Mom! No!"

"—run the whole way there and the whole way back. I will buy you the new Teen People Magazine. I will buy you *several* teen magazines. I will get gum—not sugar free! I will get chocolate. I will pay you any amount of money you require, but *you have to do this* for me. Please, Molly. This is really, *really* important."

"Mom? You don't seem to be *hearing* me? I'm afraid it's not going to be possible..."

"Let's go," I said, dragging her by the elbow toward the first person in the waiting area old enough to be a grandmother. Better still, the woman spoke English. I exchanged rushed and insincere pleasantries before I shoved Molly in Granny's direction. To my relief the woman smiled at Molly and patted the empty seat beside her.

"Okay!" I shouted over my shoulder, disregarding the look of panic on Molly's face, not to mention the outraged stares of our fellow passengers. "I'll be right back!"

Off I dashed back toward the first moveable sidewalk, only to discover it was blocked with out-of-service yellow tape. Undeterred, I flew down the first rubberized ramp. I muscled and squeezed past slow-movers, I pushed and pardoned my way to the second movable sidewalk (it was working!) and sprinted on in the fast lane with superhuman speed.

No English books in the first shop. My lungs burned but on I ran past cheese shops, record shops, the Louvre shop, my leather sandals slapping on the marble floors until, *thank you Jesus!*, a small stand of English books. And a rack of trashy American magazines.

Okay. First, a book. Robert Ludlum...Danielle Steele...John Grisham...Dick Francis. Could I dare hope for something less distasteful? To my immense relief, out of this sea of bad books rose John Irving's *A Widow for One Year*. I snatched a copy and turned to load both arms full of adolescent magazines before racing toward check out.

So far, so good. A few remaining francs and just enough time to score the new Ricky Martin CD I'd seen in a passing window.

I'm a terrible mother, I thought as I stuffed the CD into my purse and fought my way back to the long line of travelers clearing security. She'll never forgive me, and who could blame her? She's probably weeping in the arms of a complete stranger at this moment. *That's* the memory of France she'll carry into adulthood. I shoved my way to the front of the line, impervious to looks of annoyance and murmurs of reproach. I cut in front of the old and infirm and pushed my way back onto the movable sidewalk.

Finally, I fell gasping and triumphant at Molly's feet. Sweat was pouring down my beet-red face. Into her lap I heaped symbols of my everlasting gratitude.

"Here," I said.

At the first sight of Ricky Martin, her narrowed eyes softened and some color returned to her cheeks. "Okay," she said. "Where's the chocolate?"

"We will now begin pre-boarding families with children," came the announcement overhead. I lavished quick praise upon Granny, who sported, I noticed for the first time, tattooed knuckles and a nose-ring.

"Wait a minute, Mom. What are you doing? *I'm* not a child," Molly said. "They called people with *children*."

"What, are you kidding?" I whispered, pushing her to the front of the line. "For heaven's sake, you're only thirteen. Anyway, you're small. Let's go."

