There’s no gallery space here in St. Pierre, so when the mayor’s office organized an arts-and-crafts fair, the merchants were asked to provide display space for the creative crowd.

Sandrine called me to help her hang her paintings. They’re big and powerful, and a bit surprising because she’s tiny and delicate. Many of them are drawn from her memories of life in Laos, before she and her family escaped. “I’m going to be showing in the window of the pastry shop,” she said. “I went in to talk with the owner, but he seemed kind of unfriendly.”

“Don’t worry. Pascal’s really sweet. Just a little shy. You don’t know him?”

“No. He’s at the other end of town, and we’re closer to the supermarket, so I don’t go there very often. Besides, I’m always watching my weight.”

“I’ll come with you. I’ve gotten to know him over the past few years.”

On Friday morning, when I was buying my weekly indulgence, I sized up the space. “I hear you’re going to participate in the exhibition,” I said. “I’m going to help Madame Hugeot hang her paintings.”

“Madame Hugeot?” He looked blank. “Oh, you mean”—he pulled back the corners of his eyes—“her?”

“She’s Laotian by birth, but she’s lived here since she was a young girl. Very talented.” I probably sounded a little defensive.

“If you say so.” He handed me the neatly tied box of pastries.

Sandrine and I hoisted the paintings into place and restored the ladder to the back of the shop.

Pascal softened a bit when I introduced them. He even looked with interest at the larger of the two paintings, nodding his approval. We shook hands and left.

“Come on,” Sandrine said, “I’ll buy you a coffee. It’s the least I can do to thank you.” We trundled across the square to the café. In a week or so the lindens would have leaves, but it was still early March, so we sat inside. She ordered a pot of herb tea. I’m made of sterner stuff: a double espresso.

“So, Pascal wasn’t so bad, after all, was he?” I prompted.

“No. He was nice.” She dunked the tea bag three times in the oversize cup and squeezed it out. “Is he gay?”

“I don’t know.” I was taken aback. “He makes good pastries; that’s all I know.”

“Well, maybe I’ll go there sometime. François adores macarons.” She turned her wrist to see the time. “Oh! I have to run. Thanks for the help.” We kissed each other’s cheeks and she scurried off.

Across the square, fading spring sunlight warmed the sandstone facade of the Mairie, illuminating the hard-won motto of eternal hope: Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité.