

## PRAISE FOR *Costalegre*

“A vividly drawn novel of family, sacrifice, and the limits of understanding.”

—**SOUTHERN LIVING**

“A mesmerizing story of alienation, intimacy, and the elusive powers of art.”

—**NYLON**

“Its charm lies less in its summarizable qualities . . . than in Maum’s superb balance between humor and grief, and her talent for saying just enough, never too much.”

—**BOMB**

“Compelling. . . . freshly original and unusual.”

—**BOOK RIOT**

“Maum’s coming-of-age novel among some of Europe’s elite is heartbreaking in its evocation of a teenage girl whose mother collects artists to save but who ignores the daughter struggling not to drown.”

—**STAR TRIBUNE**

“An intimate fever dream.”

—**LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS**

“An arty, lavish novel, *Costalegre* examines one of the relationships that is often the most surreal to dissect: the one between mother and daughter.”

—**THRILLIST**

“A rich and delectable tale of art, love, and war.”

—**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**, Starred Review

“Enchanting.”

—**KIRKUS**, Starred Review

“A brilliantly arch and haunting novel of privilege and deprivation.”

—**BOOKLIST**

“A soul-searching, atmospheric novel set in a hot, humid climate as torrid as the affairs of the characters who inhabit it.”

—**LIBRARY JOURNAL**

“A wonder.”

—**R.O. KWON**, author of *The Incendiaries*

“As heady, delirious, and heartbreaking as a young girl just beginning to fall in love with the world.”

—**SAMANTHA HUNT**, author of *The Seas*

“A spectacular high-wire act that dazzles  
and devastates.”

—**LAURA VAN DEN BERG**, author of *The Third Hotel*

“A special book, by a writer who proves on these  
pages that she can do anything.”

—**JULIE BUNTIN**, author of *Marlena*

“Memorable and meaningful, Maum’s work remains  
with me as a reminder of love in the agony of teenage  
years and art in the terror of war.”

—**AMELIA GRAY**, author of *Isadora*

“With its captivating mix of true-to-life characters and  
WWII history, *Costalegre* is surreal, intelligent, and full  
of integrity.”

—**MARK EISNER**, author of *Neruda:  
The Biography of a Poet*

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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# Costalegre

*A Novel Inspired by Peggy Guggenheim and Her Daughter, Pegeen*

**COURTNEY MAUM**



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

*For the daughters*



1937

## Sábado

Mother's brought them all this time—the entire bin of loons. Already, nails and hammers. Rags drying in the trees.

The way over was days long, my clothing sticking to me, our bags chalked because mother never tips. She and her awful vulture man holding court in the dayroom. Endless speculation and the sharp sound of cracked ice. Hetty, even more desperate than usual, telling Mumma not to drink so much, that we were at such an altitude, and with all the bumps . . . but it was of course Hetty who was sick first, and into a paper bag which was one of those cheerful bags that is sharp in the corners and just the right size, and there would have been so many other nicer uses for that bag.

A fueling stop in the Azores. We sat (and sat) in the cafés. The Portuguese authorities went through all our trunks and letters without any idea, I don't think, of what

they were looking for. Mostly, they wanted news from France, but their French was very bad and their English, entertaining. Konrad told them the Führer was coming but he hadn't arrived yet, and Mum bought a straw hat.

I really liked the sleeping berths and was assigned one of my own, but of course, Konrad can't be forced to sleep with Mumma in such small quarters, so I was forced to share with her, which was—as it always is—moist. She has always been a noisy sleeper but her botched nose makes it worse, and plus, there was the sound of the engines and the propellers slashing through the night. Except for the views, which are dreamlike, as if you're finally a bird, it's terrible to throttle through the space and sky.

All the other loonies are coming on a boat, and I spent a lot of time scanning the ocean for them. For a pirate ship. That's what they should be on, really, a lively pirate ship. Mum told me the artists would be held for ages at customs and that it was silly to look for them when I could play a game with the ones we already had, but it didn't seem that farfetched to imagine one of the Spaniards floating calmly on a canvas or flying on some swan. And in any case, I did see boats, a lot of them. Just not the ones my mother had paid to help escape.

Hetty was sick again, by the way, on the drive out to Costalegre. Not that I can blame her (the drive is from a nightmare), but I will blame her all the same. She is just

so nervous and muttering incessantly about how it will be too hot to write, and I want to say that no one would have minded if she'd stayed in France.

But the heat is something that will stay with me forever. In any case, it's too disheartening to describe the bus ride, which seemed longer and hotter and more . . . reptilian than it did when I was seven, the last time we were here. There were so few of us then, just Mumma and me, and Papa, a tutor for me and Stephan (and Stephan also there), and Magda, who loved me, who Mum says she couldn't find to cook for us this year. Of course there were artists. There are always artists. But I remember them as friendly and they didn't live in our same house.

Now Mum says that I can't count on finding Magda and that what with all of the urgency around our leaving, she couldn't find a tutor for me either. And who knows how long we will be in Mexico! Meanwhile, Steph gets to stay in school and go round honking on his alphorn while I'm carted through the jungle with all of Mum's rescues. If she ends up putting her museum here, I am going to die.

Sábado, later

So I have a new father. His name is Konrad Beck and he hates Mumma more than Papa did. He is tall and narrow but quite tan for a German. He was in an internment camp so he is thin and angry. Mum saved him by marrying him—he is the toast of all the town! So of course Legrand is jealous, Legrand who really is a vulture, and just as indiscreet. Legrand says Konrad is the most important surrealist in all of Europe, after him.

Konrad is in love with a beautiful woman named C., so Mum brought her along, also. Charlotte is a famous writer but because she is a woman, I guess she goes by C. There is talk of all the horses they will ride. Mother's furious—she can't ride anymore because of the problems with her ankles, but we rode when we were here last—the beaches are beautiful and the sand is deep and wet, which makes it harder for the horses to run away with you. I know Mum is wretched about these plans because she won't be able to

follow them—I've heard that C. is very good. But she'll still check their hair when they get back to see if they went swimming, that's what she did with us.

There's not much that Mum can do about C. She is beautiful and talented and also she's from England, and Mum's jealous to death about her accent and her pretty skin. C. wears thick white shirts tucked into long navy skirts of the same material, and somehow she keeps them clean, and of course the contrast is very painful with mother, who is always changing outfits to suit her mood. I understand why Konrad loves C. I think it is hard not to. But still, Mumma would be so much calmer if Konrad acted thankfully.

Hetty is the only other woman with us in Mexico, besides Mum and C. As I have mentioned, Hetty is just horrible. She's so persistent, she's like a dripping nose. Hetty is also a writer, and is terrifically jealous of C., who has published several books already and always to high praise. Mostly, though, Hetty is Mum's secretary and her minder, in a way. She's always running after her trying to get her to drink more water, and me, to get more sun. But not too much because Mumma likes my hair golden but not yellow—I'm telling you, she's the worst. She hates Konrad because he doesn't love my mother and she can't stand Legrand because he thinks she doesn't have a light on in her head. This is probably the only thing I agree on

with Legrand! Hetty wishes that mother listened to her the way she heeds Legrand, but my mother doesn't know what to do with other women except try to dress like them.

Anyway, we're not in the same house as last time, which was beautiful, and pink. It was small and perched above the ocean next to a row of other *casitas*, but this time, we have one of the *casas*, and we are all alone. The place is called Occidente and it's the brightest blue. It's right above Teopa Beach so actually Mum probably can watch them go horse riding and ring a bell or something if they swim.

Legrand was the one who assigned everyone to rooms, which of course Hetty was upset about, because he gave her the worst one. I'm on the third floor with the rock collector and the photographer, and Baldomero was given his own house. Mum is on the second floor near Legrand, whose room is almost as big as hers. My room is circular, even the bed is circular, and there is just a piece of fabric instead of a real door. There is also a giant hole cut out of the wall that looks onto the sea. It's supposed to be the  *ojo*, the eye they put in all the bedrooms here. Well, it's creepy to think the boats out there can see into my room.

I've brought along my art supplies and of course I have this diary, but other than writing and painting and looking nice for Mumma, it's unclear what I'm supposed to do. Mum says when we settle in, she'll see about a tutor, but she doesn't speak Spanish, so how will she do that?

She said she thought I should take lessons from the other artists in their proper disciplines, and that if I did that, I would be a cultured girl. But what am I going to learn? How to be upset with everything and turn things upside down?

Mum says our artists are the ones the Führer decided were the most degenerate in Europe and that they couldn't stay there if they kept making art like that. Konrad has actually met the Führer and says that the entire thing is because the Führer is a terrible artist so he's jealous of the good ones. They were in art school together and the Führer was always doing landscapes, so now he thinks all German people should only do landscapes too. Konrad told my mother Europe will go to war over bad watercolors. It was so nice to hear them laugh.

What I'm not happy about:

The heat!

Not being able to/not knowing how to swim

Antoine Legrand

Hetty!

War!

What I'm happy about:

Having time with Mumma

The rock collector can maybe teach me sign language

Making some new paintings

C.

Not being in stupid France

My hair

Maybe Stephan and Papa will join us if the war gets bad

## Martes

Last night at dinner, there was a fight about whether or not to keep the staff. They are here year-round. We haven't come in seven years but they stay on just in case, sweeping petals from the courtyard and pushing wire brushes across the droppings left by bats. Except for Magda, as I've mentioned, who Mum says can't be found. And I can't even ask the other Mexicans about her because I don't speak Spanish and there is no way I'm asking Baldomero to speak to them for me because he would think it hysterical to say something I hadn't actually asked.

In Costalegre the male servers wear white with red boleros and the girls wear these fetching shift dresses with flowers and birds embroidered on them in red, yellow, and green. Way down below the house, you can see the wet dresses flapping in the sun. You wouldn't believe how quickly they go dry. You have to be fast about it, can't leave them all day there: the colors lose their colors in the sun.

We started with cold soup and everyone was quiet while they served it. The soup made a glucky sound as it was spooned into the bowls, and the French photographer, Caspar, got some on his shirt. It was the serving girl's fault, but you would have thought the worst had happened, with how upset he was. Caspar hates it here, he'll probably hate it always. If I had to go everywhere with Baldomero, I would hate it too. (It was Baldomero who brought him. He wants a pet kinkajou and he wants Caspar to take photographs of them together when he finds it.)

When the servants returned to the kitchen, Hetty said wasn't it just something, the lovely darkness of their skin, and Legrand went into a huff as he is wont to do when Hetty opens up her mouth.

"I told you to do away with servants!" is what Legrand said. He doesn't believe in having servants. Says it makes him self-conscious about his art.

Mum went on with the soup-eating. "Life would be impossible without them. You have no idea what the road is like to get food."

New papa was eating glumly, as he usually does. "Our colleagues are starving. And we're being served soup."

Mother snapped up, and it started. Actually, it's not a snap, when she gets going; it's slow and cool and all the more frightening for its coolness and its slowness.

“Your colleagues are not starving,” she said, scoop of spoon, a slurp. “They’re in second-class cabins cavorting in some social hall on top of the Atlantic. Hardly a great hardship, I should say. And in any case”—the spoon was put to rest, and I’d forgotten breathing—“the staff comes with the house.”

They come with the house, and they go with the house too. I thought of the people left behind in Paris, all of the staff there. Henri the driver, not brought because he’d have nothing to drive here, and the girl in her ironed navy uniform who never looked at me, because we’re the same age.

“Open the prisons! Disband the armies! Bring them to our table!” Legrand roared.

Mother sighed here, and so I shall make proof of it: she doesn’t always love him. Hetty was stricken with panic. C. worked through the wine.

C.—“Perhaps if there weren’t so many, is the thing.”

Caspar (who had returned from the kitchen, a wet patch on his breast)—“It’s despicable. Being served.”

Mum—“Really, I think you’d all be far more uncomfortable if you had to share your meal with staff. What, will Baldomero translate?”

Baldomero—“I, for one, find it positively luscious to be served.”

Konrad—“Perhaps you dine alone, then. In your tower . . .”

Legrand—“We are Europeans. Surely we can cook.”

Mum—"I'm an American. And I can't. You can send the staff away as far as Paraguay. I'd still have to pay. Who's going to bat your sheets out every evening? You? Sleep with scorpions. Be my guest. Ah." The coolness and the slowness. The stem of a glass, held. "You already are."

New father ignored the purpose of this reminder, which he does until he can't, and then it is like the old scenes, when Papa used to rub Mum's head with the awful jam.

Konrad—"I agree it's vulgar. It isn't art. We shouldn't have such hierarchies."

Mum—"Oh, really? Then how do you account for what Baldomero's paintings are fetching, versus, say, your own?"

This was very cruel of her, because Konrad despises everything about Baldomero Zayas, except his giant art.

"Maybe just someone to do the cleaning, then," C. offered. "Konrad's a good cook."

Mum—"Yes, why not do away with them?!" (She had trouble pushing her chair out.) "I'll finish dinner in my room!" And she shook the service bell.

## Mañana la matina?

If I have learned one thing about being a woman, it's that men will change your mind. This morning there aren't any servants in white dresses and there isn't anything to eat. There are a lot of instruments out on the table to potentially make breakfast with, but everyone comes into the kitchen and stares at them, and knows not what to do, so the artists are walking around with bright glasses of red tea the cook left out to cool, but even that's all gone now, and everyone's confused.

Mother is lying in her green robe, enjoying the sun. Quite pleased with herself, she won't even tell the others where she's sent them. If I know mother, last night Konrad got to her. *Lea, je t'en prie*. Or maybe he found it in him to hold her: she'd send the staff to kingdom come, for that.

In any case, it could take eons to discern which of these pots holds the salt and which the sugar, and so the loons walk around listlessly, muttering to one another, admiring

the flowers that I've never been able to name. Magda used to tell me the names of them, in Spanish, but I haven't retained anything, because I'm constantly being put into situations where I have to learn new things.

C. woke, though, and she is prone to hangovers. She closed her eyes when she saw the waiting kitchen, and opened them, and worked. By that evening, we had coffee. I exaggerate, but you have to boil all the water here because of what's inside it, and you have to light a fire to boil things. It is not unlike living in a coal bunker, Costalegre without staff.