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JENNY'S PARIS

A Father and Daughter's
Personal Journey

PICASSO v. HUFFINGTON

Who's Right?

BRIAN BOITANO

The Italian Iceman

GALVESTON



THE FIRST TIME SHE SAW PARIS

WE caught Paris at a good moment. Or it caught us that way. Jenny was nine, that magical year of a girl's life which, if she has been fortunate not to have been born amid war and horror, passes in an aura almost stunning in its innocence. And yet it will pass. Girls that age can make you want to cry the way you might have the first time you ever saw, really, a van Gogh. They make you want to hold time itself.

Days and weeks after leaving Paris, I smiled at having been there again. I remember one evening on the Left Bank along the tree-lined Boulevard St. Germain, standing with Jenny on a street corner next to the Atomic City clothing store watching a medieval puppet show. During the performance my attention wandered, first to the crowd of Parisians and tourists around us, then to the street full of cars, taxis and buses, finally to a row of brown and gray stone apartment buildings across the intersection. They were centuries old but didn't seem covered with coal soot, as is the fate of architecture in London. I wondered who lived in those buildings among rugs and bookshelves and televisions and Cuisinarts — lives I'd never see or know. On the top floor of the cornermost building a single window caught my eye: Its awning was scarlet, its flower box equally ablaze with roses or carnations — hard to tell from seven stories' distance.

I chuckled involuntarily at the exquisite flamboyance. At home, I lived in a gray, brick-trimmed apartment with white walls and beige carpet and a covered parking lot near a 7-Eleven. I looked down at Jenny and squeezed her hand. Tonight, at least, our home was here.

The tale of our week that summer in the City of Light began with a twist: my ankle. I had stopped off in London to pick up Jenny at her Uncle Mike's, and while chasing her cousins around the garden in Surrey, my Nikes found too much purchase on the slick grass. In a moment I was hobbling like a weekend

BY ROD DAVIS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANNY TURNER





athlete. Perfect, I thought. Heading for the streets of Paris with 20 percent mobility. How impressive. How sophisticated. What a maroon.

It gave me, however, a perfect opportunity to sulk. I exploited it the next day all the way through Gatwick airport. Not only was I sporting a limp, but two shoulders of luggage, including a suitcase filled with four stuffed animals, all of which Jenny thought indisputably indispensable. Somewhere en route to the wrong departure gate it occurred to me I had left my itinerary for Paris back at the office, where it would do me *the most possible good*. I didn't even know the name or location of the hotel in Paris at which I had made reservations.

Jenny, meanwhile, was clutching my hand. She was pretty and completely nine-ish in her peach jump suit. I had on my trendiest black trousers and semi-iridescent gray-checked coat. To the people we passed, we appeared exactly as the image I was maintaining in my mind against all odds: a really hip dad about to take his daughter on the trip of her life. Except I was grimacing with each step, had already dripped British airport coffee



(no known solvent) onto my shirt, had five minutes to make it to the correct gate and had no idea where we would actually spend the night once we got into a country, where, it was increasingly coming to me, I was going to be humiliated every time I opened my mouth to try to communicate.

I was trying to finesse all this in Jenny's eyes. Lord knows I've been an object of pity and scorn in front of females, but every father gene in me said if I couldn't stay cool in front of my offspring I'd never be able to wear a pair of Jockey shorts again. I'm not saying that men are supposed to be competent, but it seems imperative to make a show of trying. And what is a daddy if not someone to work out all the details? By the time we boarded our plane, I was in what my grandmother calls a "state."

A miracle transpired over the English Channel. When we arrived at de Gaulle airport, everything in my body and mind that was making me crazy was in remission. This was Paris. I would figure it out.

Studying the information signs in the terminal, I was able to reconstruct a probable name for our hotel, the Pont-Royal on the Left Bank ("a favorite with French writers who meet in the bar with their publishers," a memorable phrase from my left-behind guidebook had promised). I hailed a cab — a Mercedes — and went through a brief vaudeville with the driver:

"Pont-Royal?" I asked.

"(Unrecognizable French colloquialism for 'huh?')."

"Pont-Royal. *Oh-tell*."

Long quizzical stare not without its bemusement and condescension. Eyes pass to me, my luggage, my daughter, her stuffed dog, Chester, back to me.

I'm thinking, "Give me a break." I say, again: "Pont-Royal," and begin to fumble for paper to write down the troublesome name.

"Ah," he says, having timed it perfectly. "Pon-Woyal. Oui."

I make a mental note. Always pronounce "R" in French as though you were Elmer Fudd.

And we entered the city. At first it could have been a hundred others I've visited, but then it was only Paris. Jenny saw the Eiffel Tower for the first time as we cut through the slick, wide avenues of the Right Bank. It was a



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Paris will remain with
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Sunday and sunny; warm, a light breeze. For some reason I had been ready for an assault. All I saw was the opportunity to be pampered, to become lost, as so many Americans have, in a place where beauty, though not without its cruelty and caprice and temporality, can make you almost drunk with being alive. Americans aren't brought up that way, and there isn't an American who comes to Paris who doesn't feel the impact. Some react with tremendous wounded pride and anger. Others never wanted to return home. By the end of the week I would have given anything to live in that apartment with the red shade, and Jenny could've passed for any of a dozen French schoolgirls.

We saw no writers and publishers in the Pon Woyal, but from the window of our sixth-floor room, Jenny and I could observe the Eiffel Tower to the left and Sacré Coeur atop the hills of Montmartre to the right. At night the two landmarks were lighted like the angels of some architect's fantasy. Even by day, the view was almost worth 1,300 francs (\$210). But the room did have a bidet. Jenny thought it was a "little sink," which was closer

to the truth than my first impression, not to say use, of the silliest piece of porcelain ever devised.

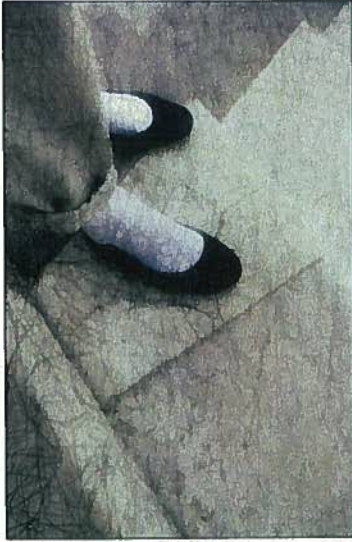
We left Chester, Fluffy, Rusty, Ribbons and Hedgehog in the room and walked through empty Sunday streets toward the Seine. It was midafternoon, and I was still jet-lagged. In addition to having forgotten my guidebook and itinerary, I had left behind my *Larousse*. My body was in France but my mind was having trouble recalling the most pitiable phrases from college *Français* circa 1967. I was also hungry. Across the street, in the sun, was a café lined with just the sort of people you'd expect to see sitting at a bistro on the Left Bank on a Sunday afternoon. Tourists, probably.

As I usually do when I want to talk myself into something that may have a downside risk, I inverted the issue and passed it to Jenny as a question. "Are you hungry, sweetheart?"

"Not really."

"Are you sure?"

Etc. until I had convinced her she was indeed hungry. Therefore we would have to eat, risking the café and my French. I guided us across the boulevard. We took a table with a round Formica top the size of a cocktail tray.

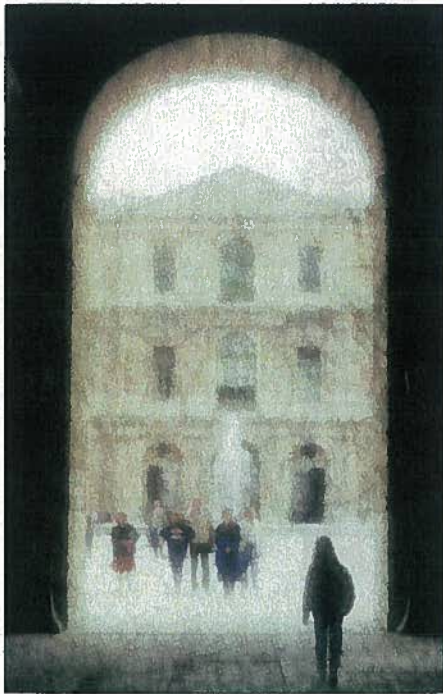


Somewhere between trying to hail a waiter ("By and by, God caught his eye" is my favorite epitaph) and wondering if the woman next to me was German, French, British or American (could she perceive my bumbling?), I realized I wasn't going to get much further than *pommes frites* and omelets, which is what I ordered for Jenny. I favored the *Croque Monsieur*, the name of which I carefully pronounced twice. Which may be why the waiter brought me two of them. Two ham-and-cheese sandwiches deep-fried in batter, or butter, or something that congealed rapidly at a surface temperature of about 86 degrees.

Since the people around me were watching with what I took to be bemusement, I ate both sandwiches. I mean, I *always* eat two *Croque Monsieurs* when I get to Paris. And to drive home the point that I'm a *savoir-faire* kind of guy, even in the face of *service compris* (tip included) printed on the menu, I left 10 francs. You eat twice, you tip twice.

After lunch, we continued on toward the Seine. Our destination was the cathedral of Notre Dame, which featured free recitals Sunday evenings. But progress was haphazard. In addition to having left behind my guidebook, itinerary and *Larousse*, I also had forgotten the map. Nonetheless, we found our way. As we neared the river, streets that had seemed so quiet and unpopulated became a state fair midway. But up on the sidewalk along the river wall we could stroll rel-





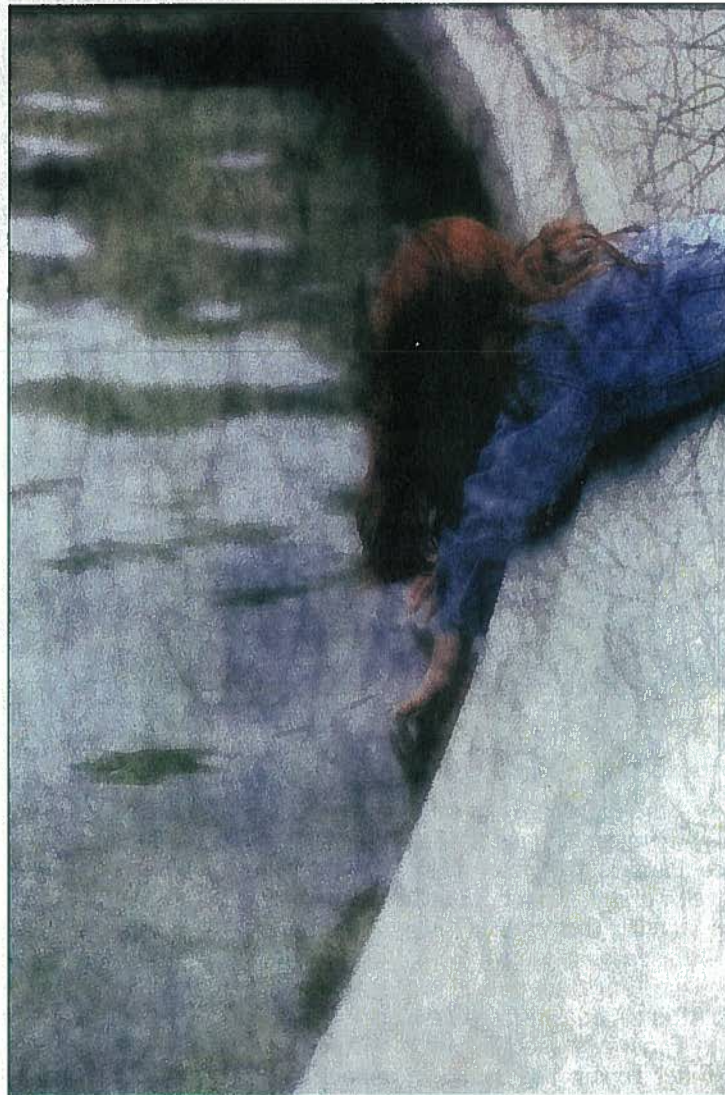
atively unbustled. The light, that light so many painters have lived and died trying to capture, flattered even the most plebeian barges. I put Jenny up on the wall for a better look, then we strolled hand in hand toward the Île de la Cité, where, in 1163, the century-long construction of Notre Dame — probably by ancestors of urban highway planners — was begun.

By then we had been on foot an hour and a half, a long time for a kid. It's my normal practice in city exploring to walk till I drop. We could've gotten a cab, but it didn't seem right to take a cab along the Seine on a Sunday afternoon. So I carried her.

We crossed a foot bridge to the Right Bank. Below us, hundreds of sunbathers were stretched out along the river. Many were sans garments. Jenny asked why they didn't have any clothes on. I didn't have a good answer, but I did study the situation on her behalf.

As we got closer to Notre Dame, I began to tell Jenny about gargoyles. Hideous projections of beastly, multi-species demons, they protect from vantage points all around the cathedral. That's tough to explain theologically; it's also difficult to get across to a child. I finally likened it to something from "Ghostbusters."

I had wanted Jenny to pause while I showed her the intricate detailing

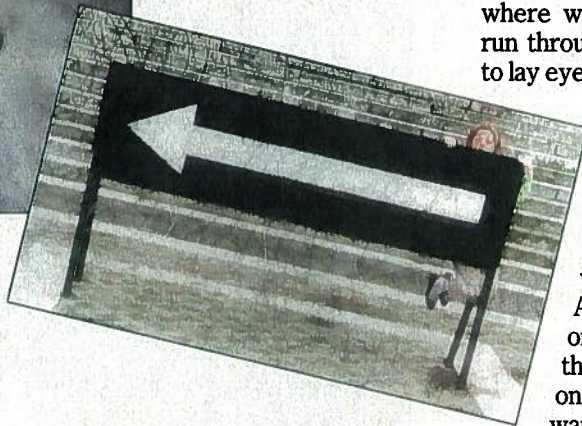


around the main entrance of the cathedral, but mostly she wanted to get inside. We passed into the narthex. A clockwise flow of silent visitors coiled snake-like around the central pews. A Mass was in progress as if tourists weren't there. Jenny wanted to light candles at a shrine for the sick and poor. We stopped twice to do so.

It was a slow encirclement. All along the walls are statuary and objects of historical interest, and side chapels. The vaulted ceilings rise overhead like whales ribs pierced here and there with stained-glass windows straining the

natural light through holy martyrs. Jenny wanted me to take a picture of a window for her best friend in Colorado, also named Jennifer, who had recently had her confirmation. Then we bought small holy pictures for Jennifer and her sisters, Miranda and Billie Jo.

Jenny and I have an understanding about religion: She's interested, and I'm not. Yet it was my idea, not hers, to visit Notre Dame, and if I wanted to view it as art and she as a place of the confirmation of her best friend, it came out the same. It calmed both of us to be there.



One of the differences in the way a 9-year-old and a 41-year-old see Paris is that museums don't rank well with the former. When we woke up Monday, the weather had changed — unseasonably cool and rainy. A good day, I figured, to take in the Louvre. After all, one *must* do certain things in Paris. My short list included the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Champs Élysées, Notre Dame and as much of the Left Bank as time allowed. I attempted to instill this into the head of my child.

"We can see the 'Mona Lisa,'" I offered, trying to hype a day in an art warehouse. It got her interest — Jenny had seen the "Mona Lisa" on a TV commercial. When she saw her again, we were standing on a sidewalk outside the Louvre staring at a chalk rendition of Leonardo's mystery woman. The sketch was dissolving under a rain puddle. "But why does she look so stern and strict?" Jenny asked. I said I didn't know, which is exactly the kind of answer a fourth-grader is trained to reject.

We never did see the real "Mona Lisa." The lines outside the Louvre's main entry stretched to Nepal. The side entry was slightly better, but once inside the door we were immersed among hundreds, perhaps thousands, of like-minded Art Lovers. We got in a line and waited for 15 minutes without moving an inch. I was trying to be good, though I'd already had a minor snit when I'd had to unpack my knapsack of cameras, sweaters, candy, etc. at the security table and repack in an official Louvre paper bag. And last night I'd gotten into an argument with Jenny walking along St. Germain because I wanted to hang out at a café and sip espresso and she wanted to go home and go to sleep and it was only 11 p.m. and what did she come to Paris to do, *sleep*?

So I was trying to cool it, but standing in that line was like being stuck in a Manhattan elevator. I weighed the

options. We could stand there, wet, another hour and get into the Louvre, where we would be obliged to half-run through the 2 billion exhibits just to lay eyes on everything. Or we could split. Jenny's position was that we should go shopping for new French shoes.

I broke out of line and made for the exit, holding her hand tightly, lest she wind up in a group tour from Amsterdam. We got outside only to be pounded again by the rain, but I felt better at once. When you're a child, you want to see movement, and move. Later, you can turn that into something that moves other people. I still feel the need to move as an adult, but on my own, as an adult, I might have remained in the line at the Louvre.

By 4:30 in the afternoon, I was shopped out and we hadn't found anything. Probably my fault. I so loathe shopping that I always blow it: Nothing seems worth buying, and whatever I want they're out of. We hit the Les Halles area shops on the Right Bank pretty hard, though. Later, we crashed at our new hotel (right next door to the old one and half the price) just long enough to recover. We couldn't stay inside long. It was Paris.

Our days in the city became timeless stretches of wandering and resting. By Monday evening I had abandoned any planned itinerary because I

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SHE SAW PARIS

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could see that sticking to a plan was hardly what Paris was about, and sticking to a plan was only a wedge between a young girl's curiosity and the accumulated have-to's (i.e., the Louvre) of a thoroughly propagandized adult. You don't *have* to see a damn thing in Paris.

One evening we found ourselves near the touristy corner of St. Michel and St. Germain, in back streets of cafés and tourists. But it looked fun, and we settled on a corner place with checkered tablecloths. It had been several hours since Jenny had talked about her dog Domino or her cat Misty and how she couldn't wait to get home and see them. I thought maybe Paris was sinking in for her, too.

We ordered fish and steak, basically, and watched the promenade around us. As we ate and the sky softened to evening, I realized that what was missing for me, in a way, was what I was seeing everywhere: romance. At roughly that same moment, I looked over Jenny's shoulder to meet the eyes of a petite, green-eyed blonde. She was with a group tour, Germans I guessed by the writing on their handbags. The woman smiled, and I averted my eyes. I wasn't embarrassed; I was caught off-guard. When I looked back she was walking away. It felt good, getting checked out. Something had been pried open, some stubborn and stagnant midlife disaffiliation. Something that was dangerously close to the source.

I looked for a few moments at Jenny, struggling to saw through her steak. Because her hair is so unsubtle, a glowing copper auburn, it is common for strangers to touch it and remark on it. In time, she will see that as an advantage, but at 9 she endures it in a polite but put-upon innocence. Romance had not yet come to Jenny's life, and it seemed in exile in mine. In Paris, the two of us shared a closeness almost impossible to translate. As a memory, it will remain with us as each of our fates evolves. It is a proof.

Across the narrow street, a pair of sidewalk artists sketched caricatures. Jenny, who wants to be an artist and a veterinarian ("I can paint in the morning when the light is nice and take care of the animals in the afternoon"), wanted to have her likeness done. I agreed. At first, she was too shy to approach the man earning his rent on

the tourist beat, but she did. The charcoal portrait was funny and obnoxious at once. Jenny liked it. It cost 30 francs. We walked back along St. Germain to the hotel and I tucked her in with her menagerie. I looked out the window at the Paris night and I don't remember falling asleep.

In the morning, we went to the Musée d'Orsay, right around the corner from our third hotel in as many days.

I had spotted number three, Hotel Bersoly's Saint-Germain, on the rue de Lille on a morning walk and liked it for its homeyness. It was worth the move, though Jenny had balked at first. Routine is a passion with her. She calls herself a "homebody," and likes nothing better than a quiet night. But the owner's dogs stayed in the lobby of Bersoly's by day, and the woman who prepared our breakfast always fussed at Jenny to eat more, that's what

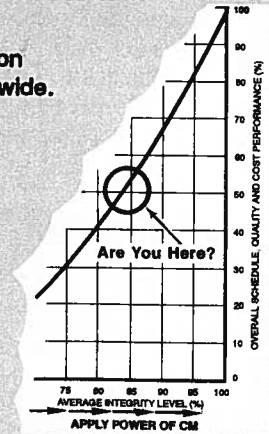
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SHE SAW PARIS

France was about, she said: eating. And the room had a wall-mounted hair dryer. It was fine.

The d'Orsay is smaller and more manageable than the Louvre; its specialty is impressionist exhibits. I thought that if I were a child this would be a good way to approach the problem of Culture. I was partly right.

It was too much at once. Not the obsessive glut of the Louvre, but more than a 9-year-old can absorb. She liked the Rodin sculptures and the scale model of Paris — you walk on see-through glass and see the miniaturized city underfoot. I was intent on finding Rousseau, Degas and the painters who, when you are ready to view them, are incomparable teachers. I ended up hefting Jenny on my back. That's also a nice way of seeing art, with your daughter's breath a finger length from your own.

Then it was back to Les Halles and the shoe trail. We caught the Métro and got off inside a shopping mall. The visit was purposeful; I liked the idea

of being in a shopping mall in Paris. Back on the streets we skipped our usual McDonald's for lunch and had pizza. Fortified, I led Jenny through a series of French department stores in an increasingly dispiriting search. "It's like that place in Beverly Hills," Jenny said. "They don't have anything for little children." It wasn't quite as bad as Rodeo Drive, though, and finally we found *chaussures* on which we could both agree: low-cut, black felt pumps, only 55 francs. I would have bought another pair, white dress shoes, but Jenny's size was sold out.

Business taken care of, we fanned out into the city. I took Jenny to Montmartre to ride the funicular tram up to the Sacré Coeur. The rain, which had stayed with us all week, cleared for a few hours. The steps to the gleaming white basilica were full of students sprawled in the sun, playing guitars, sleeping, trying to pick each other up.

Montmartre was the only place on the Right Bank I liked. We negotiated the street-side stalls. I wanted to find La Coupole, the café where Lenin, Hemingway and others had hung out,

and I got mad at myself when I couldn't. Since the café is in *Montparnasse* on the *Left Bank*, my failure to find it on the Right Bank was not surprising, but I didn't discover the error until days later. My mistaken wandering led us downhill to Pigalle, the 42nd Street of Paris. Jenny thought it was ugly. I thought it perhaps would be amusing: wall-to-wall sex shops and buses of tourists from Japan and Denmark. But Jenny was right.

We took the Métro back to our own turf, the Left Bank, and caught a movie: "Hairspray," the John Waters musical about a Baltimore teen dance show that integrates in 1963. It was our second film in Paris. "Adventures in Babysitting" ("*La Nuit de Folie*") had caught our eye on a previous night, though we had passed up "Red Heat," the Schwarzenegger-Belushi vehicle listed in French as "*Double Detente*."

Going to movies in Paris may seem as gauche as eating McNuggets on the Champs Élysées, which we also did twice, but movies are the art museums of the information age. And what could be more French than the



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SHE SAW PARIS

cinéma? Strange double projection: we, in their country, watching ourselves in their theater, among them, secret spies in the family living room.

The markets near Montparnasse, the alleys around the Sorbonne, most of the sixth *arrondissement* on the Left Bank became our never-never land. I never knew the time. We awoke, had croissants, coffee and juice, and hit the streets. We stopped for lunch, went out again, did whatever we wanted when we wanted, and when night brought summer's day to an end, just short of midnight, we straggled home to sleep. Often I carried Jenny those last blocks, and after a while, it didn't even seem like extra weight.

Within each of those days we had only one routine: the street performances along St. Germain. Some were pretty awful. We waited once as a thin, distracted man of about 30 slowly assembled several dozen wine bottles and meticulously broke off the bases, piling the shards into a cardboard box. This went on for an hour (we left and returned). Eventually, when a crowd

had gathered, the man revealed his plan, which was to dump the glass onto another piece of cardboard and lie face down on the mound of fragments, while someone from the audience stood on his head to add extra weight. I was one of four people who declined to be part of the show.

After the trick, the performer rose, brushed glass from his forehead and solicited money. "He's bleeding," Jenny said. And he was, from three or four cuts so fresh they were still white. It was worse, I thought, than watching the fire-breathers in Mexico City. They were wretched and desperate; this was brutal and sadistic. On subsequent evenings when we passed that corner and saw the man with the glass face, we didn't linger.

But for the puppets, we stopped every night. Jenny was fascinated with the show. She remembered every movement and cue. It was an ingenious and masterful one-man performance. The puppeteer stood on an upside-down plastic mop bucket and wore a black-draped box over his head and shoulders. The result looked like the

stage for a Punch-and-Judy show. But this version, "Theatre Callejero," had an altogether different point. The skits, using hand-formed, stuffed puppets (more or less in the style of Kermit the Frog) featured a world-wise old man and an idealistic young one who played out melancholy vignettes about passion, love, hope and life.

The central scene featured the young man staring at a photo of his sweetheart, who had presumably jilted him. He decided to end it all, like Burt Reynolds in "The End," and tried a course of suicide: guns, knives and ropes, none of which worked. In the throes of Chaplinesque failure, the puppet spied a rose sprouting under his girlfriend's picture. He smiled and threw away the implements of death. The sound of triumphant orchestral horns blared from tape-cassette speakers concealed in the shoulder-mounted stage.

The puppeteer never failed to draw an enormous crowd, and we all willingly plunked francs into his collection box. On our final evening, Jenny offered the rose I had just bought for



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her. The old-man puppet leaned over and gave Jenny a kiss. It would have made a terrific photo, but I had forgotten to open the shutter on my auto-everything 35mm camera. Anyway, the sight stays in my mind. A young girl in Paris, throwing roses to the stage for the first time. No movie, no video, no TV show would ever give her that, and if she remembers the meaning of that night, she will, one day, be an artist.

On the top balcony of the Eiffel Tower the wind was so strong Jenny was reluctant to get close to the wire screen that presumably keeps Parisians from making desperately dramatic statements. But it would make a great view on the way down. The city spread around in a circle. Over there was the Arc de Triomphe, which we ascended on Bastille Day after having missed the main parade on the Champs Élysées because some bureaucrat had closed all the appropriate exits from the Métro. Down there was the Hotel des Invalides, near which I had at last run into the fabled nasty Parisian, a bank clerk. Summing up the frustrations of generations of fellow foreigners, I had thrown a ball point pen across a desk at him for refusing to cash a check after making me wait 15 minutes while he pretended not to see me. Jenny was mortified, of course, but a tourist's gotta do what a tourist's gotta do. What I saw mostly from the Eiffel Tower, however, was a green belt on Paris' rim, as if the city were connected, after all, with the Earth. To which, presently I would return.

I was surprised at how quickly I had come to feel as if I lived in Paris. The Hotel Bersoly's seemed like an apartment to which we would return after a day on the job. The corner markets seemed as if they were regular stop-offs. The little cafés lowering their awnings, the waiters busing tables after morning rounds of coffee — it seemed as if I'd eaten there for years. Jenny and I became acquainted with all the shops along St. Germain. We knew where to find the shops that sold the umbrellas with animal heads, or children's clothing, or sweet-smelling soap, and where all the Métro stops came up for air.

We even stumbled across the tiny street in the Latin Quarter where I

had stayed 15 years ago, the first time I saw Paris. I don't know if the hotel had even one star, though it did have bedbugs. I'd been crazy about it. I'd come there straight from London, where Jenny's mother Debbie and I had begun what would later become the marriage that, before coming undone, would produce the child I now sought to show the wonders of the world. So that seeing them, later, she would remember me.

Throughout the week I had wanted to have at least one great meal. We'd ruled out "fancy-schmantzy" restaurants because Jenny was heel-dragging-opposed to wearing a dress and because I've never believed any dinner is worth a week's wages. I also think French food is basically kinky. Skate wings with cabbage and onions. Pig's ear soup. Stuff like that. And then paying \$200 U.S., not counting wine.

Without Jenny, I would have given in to cultural pressure. I would have done the Louvre and I would have eaten at Maxim's. But she gave me license to go where I like best: the little places on the back streets. One night we got burned in such a place (L'Absinthe) and another (La Foux) was so-so, but on our last night we strayed into a narrow café on rue du Dragon.

The restaurant, Le Ferme St. Germain, had a decidedly feminine touch. Homey, pleasant, it smelled delicious. We took a seat next to a middle-aged American couple on their way to the south of France. The waitress approached, and then I noticed that the place seemed to be run by a family and that almost all the women had the same color hair as Jenny's. That always establishes a rapport, and they treated us like their own. Jenny ate lamb — all of it — but passed on dessert. Two days ago, eating chocolate mousse at another café, she had broken down in tears. She missed Domino, and she missed her Mummy.

Tonight she was all with me. I had coffee and a cognac, trying to prolong our stay. Nevertheless, the check came. I paid. We took our usual route back to Bersoly's: the puppet show, the wide and well-trodden sidewalks of St. Germain, a right turn on rue des St. Peres toward the Seine. Upstairs in our room, I tucked Jenny in. For the first time, I unpacked an alarm clock. The taxi to Orly would come for us very early. V

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