



"A wonderful and frightening reminder of the great responsibility of parenthood. I read with a mixture of admiration for the breathtaking honesty of the stories and a determination to continually re-examine my efforts and motivations with my own daughters."

— JEFFREY LENT, author of *In the Fall* and *Lost Nation*

FEAR FROM HOME

FATHER-DAUGHTER TRAVEL ADVENTURES

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AN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT IN PARIS

by Scott Driscoll



WHEN A SEARCH FOR "BEAUTY" EARNS A SHRUG FROM MY twelve-year-old daughter before the *Venus de Milo*, my suspicions are raised. It doesn't help that of all the treasures in the Louvre, it's an eighteenth-century bronze of Cupid and Psyche—two lovestruck, naked nymphs—that leaves her entranced. Still, it is only after a pimp for a nightclub with "live sex acts" invites me to show my *girl-friend* a good time that I begin to seriously wonder if I haven't made a big mistake by bringing my precocious seventh-grader to Paris. As far as I can tell, it's a father's job to inhibit, not abet, his daughter's coming of age.

Our first night in Paris, the city Megan considers the ultimate in "cool," which, I will discover, means she considers it the ultimate source of alternative fashion and Goth industrial music, sets the tone. I convince her to take a chance on dinner at a Basque local two blocks from our hotel on Rue Cler, a delightful market street in the vicinity of the Eiffel Tower redolent with stinky cheese and the sweet, burnt aroma of roasting chocolate, and lively with the shouts of shopkeepers and clattering mopeds. In contrast, the restaurant feels like a smoky cave. But the staff are congenial and I explain to Megan that the French have not yet learned that breathing is a right, not a privilege.

Refusing to look foolish in front of my daughter by admitting that I can't decipher the menu, I order blindly and am soon facing a plate of steaming *boudin noir*, a.k.a. blood sausage. Megan plays it safe with steak and *pommes frites*. I don't want to make the same mistake with the wine.

"Excusez-moi," I fumble, embarrassing Megan by asking the two businessmen at the next table what they're drinking.

"Bien sur."

The older gentleman, wearing a navy blue suit with a natty red tie, amiably turns the bottle so we can see the label, a 1991 Languedoc, seeming flattered that we should ask. He introduces himself as a pharmaceutical sales rep, which explains his passable English, and fills my glass with the full-bodied red and asks for Megan's. She's only twelve; I protest. He isn't fazed.

"We must all toast."

He pours. Megan sips.

"Yum," she says, looking at me for confirmation. It's dry enough to pucker a cactus.

"Wait for the toast," I whisper. She kicks my leg under the table.

"To your youth," he says, looking wistfully at Megan.

"And to your beauty," adds his partner, a stout younger man, with an open collar.

I'm a little startled. Wearing a gray tweed calf-length overcoat with loose jeans, a leather dog collar at her neck, Megan hardly strikes me as an inspiration for beauty.

"Two virtues that belong to Paris also, no?" adds the older man, noting my frown.

"Paris is old and secondhand," says the younger, scoffing at his partner's notion. He turns to Megan. Taking in the spiked dog collar, the silver rings on every finger that include braids twisted in a symbol of bondage, he says, "Do you like rodeos?"

She makes a sour face. He couldn't be further off the mark. The kindly older one excuses his partner's lack of grace, explaining that he's been working too long in Dallas. He teases an admission out of Megan—with a wink cast my way—that what she really wants to do in Paris is shop, shop, shop.

"Chanel?" he suggests. "Christian Dior, perhaps? Nina Ricci?"

My daughter grimaces. "Too snobby."

He nods wisely. The Champs-Élysées, the capital of French couture, is not for her. He suggests Galeries Lafayette and draws a crude map on a paper napkin. He proposes a final toast. "To the joy of rediscovering beauty."

The younger glowers at his partner.

"I prefer cowboys," he says.

That night, back in the room, Megan insists that we find Galeries Lafayette the next day, complaining that we looked shabby and out of place in the restaurant. Though it's nearly the end of March, it's cold and I'm wearing a baggy sweater under an old suede coat with shiny patches. When I insist that we stick to the itinerary, the Louvre first, fashion second, she snittily knocks her gray fuzzy squirrel off the bed and onto the floor. I step out onto the balcony to let us both cool off.

In May the previous school year, my daughter was banished—as far as I could tell, for being too brainy—by the cruel, popular clique she had thought were her friends.

"If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you like to go?" I asked, thinking a trip might help her overcome her woe.

"Paris!" came her unequivocal reply. Her dreamy, yearning look said it all: Where else could you find beauty with an edge, yummy chocolates, and obscure Die Form CDs all in one place? I had some misgivings, but I didn't want to argue the point. If planning a trip to Paris would lessen the harm done by her fickle friends, then plan we

would. My misgivings had nothing to do with anything we would actually encounter. Rather, they involved chasing down a boogiemer from my past.

I'd hitchhiked to Paris two decades earlier, a poor student full of writerly hopes. I'd devoured Henry Miller and concluded that Paris had everything I needed to fuel my bohemian fantasies: art, glitz, sleaze. My first night, I slept on the lawn in a chilly rain outside a full hostel and eventually convinced a suspicious traveler from Breton to let me into his tent. The next morning—wet, cold, and worried about dwindling money—I argued with my girlfriend, who had spent a cozy night indoors. I took the subway to the exit for the nearest autoroute and hitched a ride south to sunnier climes. I never looked back.

And so, Paris became the altar upon which I sacrificed my dream of becoming the Miller of my generation. Taking the less perilous route—jobs, more education, teaching, learning to write on assignment—I would continue to travel, and even now and then to write about my travels, but never could I bring myself to return to Paris. I was afraid of Paris. Paris had defeated me. Or, more to the point, it had shown me that I was more conventional, more sublunary than I wanted to admit. Only for Megan's sake could I summon the courage to return.

I pull rank the following morning. The Louvre, reported to be the largest repository of art in the world, is first on our itinerary. Megan wants to stop everywhere and snap photos. I point to the growing, dragon-sized line curling out of I. M. Pei's glass pyramid entrance and insist we pick up the pace. I want Megan to see beauty with a capital B. She would have held out more adamantly for Galeries Lafayette, but her French class read about the *Venus de Milo* and she had agreed to write a page in her journal about the Greek icon to make up for missed schoolwork.

The labyrinthine miles of high-ceilinged corridors stump my navigational skills. Megan suggests we shuffle behind a clot of Japanese tourists and, sure enough, somewhere in the Sully Wing, we find the second-century B.C. marble version of Aphrodite, purported to have captured the essence of beauty.

"Her nose is too strong," concludes my adolescent art critic. "Besides, real women don't have breasts like that, not unless they go to a plastic surgeon."

I try to explain classical ideals of proportion.

"Dad! I had that lecture at school. This is not my idea of beauty." And that's that.

Convinced she will feel differently when she sees the *Mona Lisa*, I suggest we search for the Italian room. We wander through a corridor filled with French historical paintings, Megan complaining they are too brown. But then her eye is caught by Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*. The carnage of twisting bodies, some alive, some dead, sail full, the raft pulling toward hell, seems to fascinate her.

"Look," I say, "once and for all, I want you to explain to me this fixation on whatever is macabre and violent."

Her silent, eye-rolling response: Get over it, already.

"Die Form," I say. I've got her attention. I'm on a roll. "If what they're into isn't bondage, what is it?"

Daaaad . . . her look says. *Dry up.*

Megan's earlier plan—shuffle behind the Japanese tourists—brings us eventually to the Italian Renaissance hall. Along the way, she stares at the dark eighteenth-century bronze of Cupid and Psyche, but I pull her on. Da Vinci's *La Gioconda* awaits. Again, my art critic is not impressed. "I wish some of these camera nuts would get a life so we could see it."

It's true. The venerable *Mona Lisa*, with her enigmatic smile, is covered with bulletproof, non-glare glass and shutterbugs surround the

faded painting so tightly we can't get close. I admit I'm out of tricks. She wants to go back to Psyche and Cupid. We swim against the current and stand a good long while in front of the two naked adolescents engaged in the moment of hesitation before an embrace.

"This," she declares, "is beautiful."

She can hardly tear herself away. I take a long gulp. I could have put off this discovery for at least a few more years. Beauty, for the daughter who still prefers hot chocolate to coffee and who just this morning cried when she couldn't find her fuzzy squirrel, has become inseparable from romance.

It's after four when we finish with the Louvre. We've been on our feet for six hours, but she is not dissuaded. We set off, scrawled map on napkin in hand, pursuing affordable fashions at Galeries Lafayette. For two hours we mash our tender feet up and down the sidewalks of Rue La Fayette, repeatedly changing directions, convinced we've gone too far, convinced we've missed something, until finally someone points to a large building on Boulevard Haussmann. About five stories tall, accented with the usual wrought-iron balconies, the corner building blends in with the rest until you turn the corner and see the sign in giant letters. Inside, multiple levels shimmer with chrome and mirrors under a glass dome—it feels like a cathedral.

A suspicious, crabby salesclerk wearing pince-nez spectacles follows Megan behind the dressing curtains. While I wait, arm draped with a black skirt hardly bigger than a dishtowel, a clique of school-girls Megan's age glides past. The leader looks at me and at the skirt, holds her nose and says, "Phew!" I'm thinking she doesn't like the skirt. The second girl points at me and giggles. The straggler, a tiny girl who I'm sure will be snubbed for her curiosity, lingers, and then in a shy but sincere, singsong voice, says, "*Pour vous?*" They think I'm buying the skirt for myself!

"*Non, non,*" I explain. "*Pour ma fille.*"

OK. I can take a joke. But as I wait, and wait some more, I decide that Megan will owe me for this.

Megan is so pleased with her purchases, which include a clinging top accentuating her bustline that I assure her she will never wear to school, she forgets to whine when I suggest we cap our evening with a walk up to Sacré-Coeur on Montmartre. Then it comes to her. A cathedral? You mean, you want *me* to visit a *church*?

"No way, huh-uh. Not this girl." Sorry, I inform her. It's Dad's turn now.

The nineteenth-century cathedral—which looks like a cross between a Russian Orthodox church and a mausoleum—is mobbed with tour buses. All right, I tell her. I'll concede this one. A beauty it's not. So, I agree, we won't go in. But the sweeping view of Paris at night, I point out, makes up for it. Resting on the wide, brightly lit steps, we look down at a shimmering city, the Seine, and its bridges lost in a galaxy of lights, the Eiffel Tower dominating the skyline.

Lower on the steps, enduring a cold wind, an African man strums a guitar, playing credible Bob Dylan favorites and singing in a voice far too sonorous for the music's originator. An international slouch of teenagers, leaning against a nearby wall, smoking and drinking highest 1664 beer in green bottles, applauds with false bravado. Megan remarks that they are making fun of him and that she doesn't like it. Her skin is still a little thin when she encounters anything that smacks of ridicule. Besides, she's itching to preen in front of the mirror with her new purchases. Megan demands that we return immediately to the hotel.

"Patience," I admonish. I want to soak in the ambience.

She turns away in an angry huff. Punishing me for not giving in, she walks over to join the kids at the wall. I keep an eye on her, pretending not to. Before she can get to them, she is approached by a man

in an overcoat, asking for a cigarette, then by another man, offering the same. Her vexation with her father instantly dissolves and she is back at my side in no time. "They were totally creepy," she stammers. "They teamed up. The second guy asked if the first guy was bothering me and pretended to apologize." She is white-faced, visibly shaken. I give her a big, snuggy hug.

"Since we're this close," I say, "would you mind if we swung by the Moulin Rouge?" I've long wanted to see the windmill-topped dance hall featuring the can-can, the high-leg-kicking routine immortalized by Toulouse-Lautrec posters. Actually, it wasn't the dancers so much as Henry Miller's libidinous tales of Montmartre pilgrimages that had once aroused my curiosity, but I don't tell Megan this.

The dance hall looks seedy, even from the outside. The slow-turning, neon-red girded paddles of the windmill remind me of a carnival ride. Litter blows across the sidewalk. Empty beer bottles and cigarette butts litter the foyer. Megan glances at the blown-up promotional photos in the lobby, the dancers' outrageous costumes leave their breasts bare, and bolts outside. What had I been expecting?

"Dad. That was embarrassing," she says.

I apologize, admitting that I goofed.

"Please," she insists. "Let's go to the nearest subway stop and go back to the hotel."

I check my map. Unfortunately, the nearest stop is a few blocks away along Boulevard Clichy at Place Pigalle, the bull's-eye in the Paris red-light district. We've been on our feet for twelve hours, but there's no getting around it. Down the gauntlet we must go.

We hurry past the sex joints: triple-X-rated films, strip clubs, sex acts performed onstage. I glean an abiding image of windows painted yellow, red strobe lights, parting curtains with beckoning hands extended out, cheap, overblown black-and-white photos in glass cases displaying what you can expect inside. Curious tourists claw into bags

of greasy *pommes frites*, undaunted by the sleaze. Munching. Gawking. I feel extremely awkward with my adolescent in tow, trying to pretend I'm not intrigued, trying to maintain a stance of outrage for her benefit. A velvet-gowned, rouge-lipped middle-aged woman resembling Yvette Guilbert blocks our way. She grasps my arm and in a smoke-thickened, sultry voice says, "Come inside, and bring your girlfriend." Megan, mortified, keeps her head down, tugging the other way at my arm.

This is about as far as I could have imagined straying from the ideal of beauty depicted at the Louvre. I'm ashamed to have exposed Megan to cheap carnality. When we are safely underground in the Métro, I don't try to minimize the damage.

"That was the wrong place to be," I say lamely.

"That was more than I wanted to know," Megan replies. She wears a forlorn look much like the one she wore when she recounted the snubbing she had taken from her friends.

We drag our aching feet up the narrow concrete stairs to our room. The first thing we both notice is Megan's gray squirrel. It's been rescued, evidently by the maid, and perches like a trophy atop Megan's pillow.

"I'm still mad at you," Megan says, refusing to look at me. She doesn't reply when I ask if she wants to model her new clothes. Instead, she slips into her nightshirt, then climbs into her bed and cuddles her squirrel.

I step out onto the balcony to let her sleep and to partake of my once-a-week smoke of my pipe. The night air is windy and brisk. Five stories below, the fruit and vegetable stalls are battened down, the charcuterie's awning flattened to the wall, the wine store's sandwich board taken in. A moped buzzes through, heading toward the lit brasserie just up the way. A drunk's song echoes up the canyon walls of shuttered row houses. The clucking pigeons are tucked in for the

night. The shutters are open in one of the rooms across the street. A woman sits alone in her nightgown on her bed, backlit, languidly running a brush through her long hair. I look down and see that her building is also a hotel. I look back up. She has seen me at my balcony rail, drawing leisurely on my pipe. I wonder, briefly, if she is a traveler, if she is here alone. We could talk to each other across the narrow canyon. A yearning part of me would like that solace. As though reading my thoughts, the woman discreetly closes her shutters.

I look back inside our room. The dog collar is on the nightstand with the rest of Megan's jewelry. My daughter, rolled onto her side, has fallen into an exhausted sleep, forgetting to snap off the lamp by her bed. She's tucked the squirrel under her chin. Asleep, she looks beautiful in that innocent way only childhood can sculpt. In the way that I, her father, would like to preserve. I did a bad job of it tonight.

Still, when I recall how utterly entranced she stood before Cupid and Psyche, and when I look at her collection of paraphernalia on the nightstand, I realize, finally, what my daughter has probably been wanting to scream at me for some time now; she's stretching her awareness beyond the protective bubble I've been trying to keep her in. Yet when I see how she clings to her fuzzy squirrel, I would like to think she still needs her father to be her king of conventional virtue. That's why I feel ashamed to have taken her by the Moulin Rouge.

But, in terms of my own agenda, I must admit I feel better now. I feel as if I've exorcised a demon from my past, as if I can finally call a truce with the Paris that once defeated me and accept that I'm an ordinary man helping his daughter get in touch with her own sense of wonder. And it's extraordinary, really, watching her awaken, watching her world stretch and grow.

The day of atonement. It's a fine, sunny spring day. Megan talks me into allowing her to spend an entire afternoon shopping for clothes,

and we return to the hotel loaded down with bags. After primping for a big night out, Megan models for my approval. Her thick hair falls with teased carelessness over the shoulders of her new hip-hugging jacket, which, surprisingly, is not black. The sleeveless black top, cut to accentuate the bust, is at least partly concealed by the jacket. She has decided to spare her dad the dishtowel-sized skirt and wears instead a pair of baggy cords. She adds a black ribbon bearing a tiny blue crystal and a silver star at her neck. She thickly applies dark wine lipstick and much mascara.

"How do I look?" she asks. Like a kid caught somewhere between Goth and elegance.

"You look beautiful, like Paris," I say. She beams.

Arm in arm, we stroll boulevard St. Germain, which suddenly erupts with activity. Amid loud da-dooos, two fire trucks, five police vans, and an ambulance arrive. They block off one side of the street, forcing us out into the boulevard. A snapping blaze has gutted the ground floor of a brick-and-stone building. We watch the jets of water, smell the scorch. People lean over balconies, dragging on cigarettes, watching the show.

Megan's eyes glow like gemstones reflecting the fire. Tonight the street is her parade. No building going up in smoke is going to ruin her night. We stroll on, passing Les Deux Magots, the café Hemingway made famous. Tourists linger over coffees and Pernods outside under the café's half-circle awning. The elegant hip crowd is inside, blowing smoke, lifting chins. Megan searches for her reflection in the window. Whatever it is she sees, she is pleased. She's in her zone, reigning in her own romantic Paris.