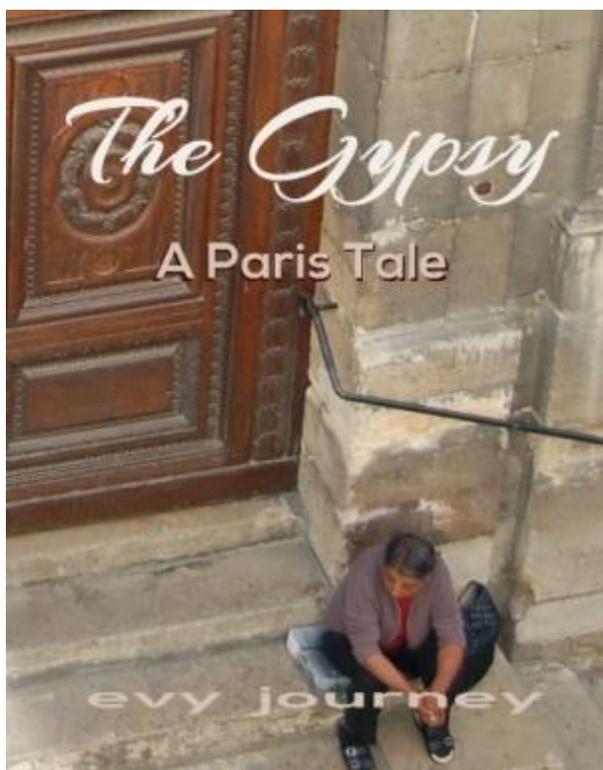


FROM: BRIEF ENCOUNTERS WITH SOLITARY SOULS
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The Gypsy



“Time to wake up, *mon petit*. It’s almost noon. You’ve been sleeping the past two days.” Mom kisses my cheek, nudges me gently.

She kisses my other cheek. “Got you some creamy, stinky cheese for lunch. Must come out of the bedroom, though.”

I get up, drag my blanket, follow her out, and plop down on the living room couch. I fall asleep again.

Loud clanging jolts me from a dream. “What’s that?”
No answer from Mom.

More loud clanging. So I go to the window to see where it’s coming from. The church tower that’s where—right across Mom’s apartment. Church bells! Church bells woke me up. I can’t see them, but I’m sure that’s what they are. Nothing to be scared of.

So I listen. I’ve never lived next to a church, never heard ringing bells this close, never seen a bell tower you could touch with a long pole. A thin clock sticks out of the tower. High above the street, facing it. I can’t see the time from where I am. The roof of the tower is a spire, with big round holes all the way to the top, maybe to let out the clanging. A couple more and the bells are silent again.

I look down the street, curious about this new place I have to live in. Next to the church is a school. *Ecole de Garçons*, it says on the gate. It’s closed for the summer, like at home. I wonder: Will I go there? I’d like that. No school bus to ride. I only cross the street.

Today, no cars. Just people walking on the street. Some sit on the long steps at the church entrance. All kinds of people. Mostly whites. Many Asians, like in California. Why so many people? Must be a festival on

this little island. That's the only time I've seen so many people on a street.

People on the church steps are in pairs or in groups, reading little books, talking, or licking ice cream cones. But there's an old woman by the edge, away from all the others. She's just sitting there. Alone. She's different. Everything about her is brown and dark—skin, hair, loose clothes, shoes. She must be Indian, not Indian from India, but American Indian. In Paris!

I hear Mom coming. "Good, you're up just in time for lunch." She carries a tray, puts it on the table, joins me at the window.

She watches with me for a minute. "Well, Jesse, how do you like it here? Noisy, huh? You'll get used to it. Close the window if it gets to be too much."

"I don't mind. Looks like fun down there."

"Good. Glad you think so. I just know you'll love Paris."

"Is there a festival? Can we go?"

"No, no festival. It's like this everyday. Isn't it wonderful? Paris is so alive."

"The school—is it just for boys? Will I go there?" I ask before she starts gushing again about Paris

"It used to be a boys' school. Now, It's an *ecole maternelle*, a nursery school. We have a rich history on the Ile. We'll take a walk some time. Visit places around here where artists and writers lived."

"So where do I go?"

"A regular *ecole primaire*. Not a special one like *Ecole Bilingue* in Berkeley."

"Will I forget English if they only teach in French?"

“No, *mon petit, bien sur que no*. You’ll always have that. They teach English, but you won’t need it. *En plus, toi et moi*, we’ll talk in English.”

Yeah, we’ll talk in English like she says. Back home, she spoke French to me. Here, she uses English. I point to the people on the church steps. “Who’re they? Why are they here if there’s no festival?”

“*Alors*, they’re tourists. There’ll be many more soon. Close the windows, if it gets too noisy. Most leave by dinnertime. It’s much quieter at night.”

I point to the dark old woman. “What about her? Is she Indian?”

“*Alors, elle*. You see many people like her in Paris. She’s a *gitane*—a gypsy.”

“A gypsy!”

American Indians, I know. From movies, museums and festivals. Some Indian kids in school, too. They could pass for Mexicans or Asians, though. But gypsies? Never seen them in California.

“How can you tell?”

“She’s not French. *Absolument pas*. They came from some other country, India or Egypt, I think, and arrived here a long time ago.”

I can see she doesn’t look like Mom, but at home, Americans come in all colors. Brown, black, white, and all shades in between. Has to be true in France, too. And why say “gypsy” like she doesn’t like them? I start to ask why the dark old woman isn’t French, but she bends to kiss me on the head. “Got a lot of things to do, *mon petit*. But first, let’s eat. *Allons-y*.”

I’ll add ‘gypsy’ to my list of things to google once we’re hooked up to the Net.

Mom is busy, fixing the apartment. So she only split a *ficelle*—that’s a small thin baguette—and stuffed my half with cheese. I ask her what cheese it is, where she got it. I love cheese, can eat it breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

“*Trou du clou*, a kind of *epoisse*. You haven’t had this before. But you know another *epoisse*. Remember? Stinky washed orange rind in a round wooden box? *Trou du clou* is smaller, good for one with a healthy appetite.” She gives me a wide grin. “I got it at *La Ferme Aubin*, an old *fromagerie* on the next block. I’ll take you there tomorrow morning if you wake up early enough.”

After lunch, I go back to the window. New people are on the steps, but the gypsy is still there. I take out my sketchbook. I actually like drawing better than surfing the net. And I prefer drawing to taking pictures of interesting places. Like the church and its bell tower. Several times, I look out the window. For things to add to my sketch. The gypsy hasn’t left. Isn’t she bored, sitting in one place? I’m no good at figures but I draw her, alone on the steps.

You wonder what I’m doing so far from Berkeley, my old home? Well, I’m now Parisian, Mom says. Since two days ago. Lucky me. But it’s the middle of summer—hot, and no school. How can I make new friends? And it’s just Mom and me. Dad’s back home. He left us to work, live somewhere outside California. I don’t know when I’ll see him again. I think we’re never going back—Mom and me.

I’ve been tired since we arrived. Flying, packing for the move, losing sleep in a new bed, getting used to the time change. So, yeah, I’ve been sleeping. But Mom isn’t

right. I haven't spent ALL of the past two days sleeping. Gotta be awake to go out.

She takes breaks between chores, and yesterday, late afternoon, she said I needed fresh air. We went out. Crossed a short bridge to the back of the cathedral on the nearby island. Mom wanted to sit. But benches—all green, under shady trees—were taken. An old man smiled at us, we smiled back. Said “*Bonjour*” to each other. So, we sat next to him.

The church by the apartment is plain. This cathedral—Notre Dame, Mom says—is nothing like I've ever seen. It has decorations, like lace. The roof makes me think of one of Mom's old skirts. Many thin pleats and lace on top. There's lace on the pointy windows, on a band around the roof, even on pointy things that jut up like thick stone spears. The French seem to like lace. Mom does. Me, I like the gargoyle statues jumping from the roof.

Paris is interesting. Will I like living here? I don't know. I have to learn, though, because I know Mom loves it here. Her eyes smile when she talks about it. She's been so sad the last few months. After my Dad moved out, Mom and I lived in our home. Ten times as large as her dinky apartment. But Mom is French, you see, and now that she's alone, she says she'll take me to live anywhere she wants. She sold our home, and we came to Ile Saint Louis. My French grandmother owned this apartment. She died three years ago when I was eight. Mom now owns it.

“Free and clear,” she says with a big smile. I like seeing her smile. I'm happy when she's happy. So, I can't really tell her—I hate many things about the apartment.

It's so old! "More than three hundred years," Mom says, like she's proud it's that old.

How's it even possible that she's proud of it? The stairs tilt every which way—towards me, away from me, to the left, to the right. Aren't they supposed to be level? You could lose your balance if you're not careful. Also, they wind around. None of the steps are the same shape and size. Many are rectangular, like they should be. But some are triangular. Dirt is ground into them so deep it's now become part of the steps. Mom says you can't suck it out with a vacuum cleaner. I never had to climb dirty, catawampus stairs anywhere. Just in Paris.

I felt like that man going up a mountain, chained to a big ball of stone, carrying my suitcase up to our third-floor apartment. Mom says you can't put elevators in very old buildings. Well, okay, but no more large heavy things dragged up those stairs again. Maybe, when I'm bigger.

To tell the truth, the stairs scare me. Just a little. They make me think of monsters, goblins, hideous hunchbacks, and savage gargoyles. They climbed up those steps and their spirits are still there. I'm sure of it. No, I don't believe they still exist, but a thousand years ago? Who knows? The cathedral—another historic and famous thing—has gargoyles all around. How could people make them if they hadn't seen them? Mom says Paris has been around way, way before America was discovered. It's older than the cathedral, which is three times older than our apartment building. I think Paris was already a city when the world still had goblins and other monsters.

I can say one thing good about the apartment. It's safe. The door may be three hundred years old—it's rusty and curvy. But it's thick, heavy, with a strong iron bolt

latched on top. And this building has a gigantic gate, with only a small door for people. It locks automatically and we have to punch a code to enter. So, it keeps other people out.

Before nine o'clock the next day, I go out with Mom. Our street, so busy yesterday, is now quiet. No one else within two blocks. But a bakery on our block is open. Inside, there's already a line of people all the way to the door. We squeeze ourselves in and someone says "*Bonjour, madame, petit,*" A pretty girl behind the counter. One of three servers.

We get two baguettes. Mom asks me, "Anything else?"

"*Croissant aux amandes,*" I say to the pretty girl, "*pour un petit morceau dans l'après-midi.*"

"*Désolé, mais n'y a plus. On ne les fait qu'une fois par jour.* You have to come before eight o'clock."

"*Okay, merci. La prochaine fois, alors.*"

"*Au revoir,*" Mom says.

All three servers answer. "*Merci, au revoir, madame.*"

The pretty girl smiles at me. "*A la prochaine, petit.*"

In California, bakery and grocery people usually don't greet you. Or thank you. Or say goodbye.

We walk to the next block for the cheese. It smells stinky even before Mom opens the glass door to the *fromagerie*. Inside, an old man in white coat greets us. The line is shorter.

So many kinds of cheeses! Much more than I've ever seen. More than at The Cheeseboard in Berkeley, which is bigger. Mom knows I prefer cheese to meat, creamy ones

especially. She asks for a *saint-felicien*, which I've never had before. The old man shows her a round piece.

Tentation and “*double crème*” are written on the package. I gasp because Mom presses it on top—she's never done that in Berkeley. I think you're only allowed to look.

“*C'est moelleux*,” the old man says, smirking. I don't like him.

Mom winks at me. “It's creamier than you've ever had; so soft, it oozes, melts in your mouth.”

I can't wait for lunch. My friends back home hate stinky. To them, cheese is a yellow brick sealed in plastic. To me, it also tastes and smells like plastic. It's not cheese. Anyway, they prefer hamburger; though I think meat is stinky too.

The *fromagerie* also sells deli meats. Mom asks for *jambon a la campagne*. That's country ham. It's such a dark bloody red, you'd think it's raw. Not pinkish like you find in supermarkets back home. Mom likes it, but I don't much care for it. Too salty. Too chewy. My Dad and I like soft, squishy American ham. We can gulp it down without much chewing.

By the time Mom and me are back to our building, some people are sitting on the church steps. The gypsy is there. Same clothes, same spot. Up at the apartment, I watch her again. She never looks up, but I wonder: Does she know I'm watching?

Not too many people come near her. When one does, she puts out her hand. Most people ignore her. Then, someone actually dips into his pocket, puts something in her hand. She's begging! She doesn't have a can or a cup for people to throw coins into, like beggars on sidewalks

in the US. She'll get more money with a can in plain view. Maybe, she's ashamed. I would be.

The next two days, I go back to my window after breakfast. The gypsy is there, holding her hand out to passersby who come near. Begging again.

"Why does she beg?" I ask Mom.

"I think gypsies like to wander. So many have no steady work. But they have to eat, so I guess some beg. Maybe, she's too old to get work, or she speaks little French."

"I can't believe she goes hungry. She looks healthy."

"Well, Jesse, *mon chou, j'en sais pas.*" Mom stares at me with her questioning frown. "Have you been watching her all this time?"

"Everyone leaves, never comes back. She's here everyday."

"I see. We'll get a router soon. You need something else to do. Make me some drawings. Right now, I must finish getting this place in order so it'll feel more like home."

Mom can do it. She's got a lot of tricks up her sleeves. She's already arranged and rearranged the furniture Grandma left her. She polished a large ancient wooden table. Now, its thick brown top shines, and you can't see the gouges. Too bad she can't do anything about how old her apartment is.

I've been thinking a lot, though. Maybe, old is not so bad if it's made of stone and concrete. These buildings are very strong. They've lasted hundreds of years. Maybe they won't collapse in an earthquake. I was always afraid of that in California.

“We’re going to Galeries Lafayette for gauzy curtains,” Mom says the next afternoon. Great! My first shopping trip in Paris, and it’s out of the Ile.

We go underground to a subway station. The train—*Le Metro*—is packed. It’s a mad rush to get on. Mom holds me firmly by the shoulders. Pushes me next to a metal pole. Tells me to put my arm around it. She stands behind me, holds on to the pole.

The train jerks to a stop; so hard I’d have fallen on someone. “Not our stop, yet,” Mom says. “Many more.” I’m still hugging the pole when she grabs my hand, pulls me along. The door slides closed right behind me. Good thing my shirt didn’t get caught in it.

The way to the store is no better than riding the Metro. People—taller and bigger—don’t see me. They bump me. I say “Ouch,” but they keep going like I’m not there. My shoulders hurt by the time we reach the store. Count this trip as another thing I hate about Paris.

Galeries Lafayette is huge. You won’t believe the glass dome on the high ceiling. All fancy stuff around it. Anyway, the store has everything Mom wants for the apartment.

She gives me her big smile, leads me down the escalator. “Let’s go for a real treat.”

She means it—the treat. The ceiling is impressive. But walking around glass counters of *patisseries*? Much, much better. Mom stops in front of Dalloyau. Chooses a mix of twenty macarons. Gets another box of something I haven’t had before—*pâtes de fruits*.

“Fruit jellies. Much better than candy,” Mom says. Maybe. Macarons have been our hands-down favorite pastry (she doesn’t want me to call it a cookie.) I like how

you bite its crunchy top and bottom, then get to soft, scrumptious fillings in the middle. There are many flavors, but I like *pistache* best.

From the Galleries, we go to a much smaller tech store for the router. By the time we're walking back to the Metro, I'm dizzy and sweating buckets. So hot, so many people rushing about. The train is not as full. Cooler, too. And we luck out, get seats. But it's smelly from sweat. I hate the Metro. I hope Mom gets a car. But I say nothing about it now. She's frowning, keeps wiping the sweat on her face.

From *Le Metro*, we walk two blocks to a bridge to Ile Saint Louis. I look at the church steps when we reach our building. The gypsy was not there this morning. Now she is. I look away. But as Mom punches the code, I turn my head. Just can't help it.

I stare at the gypsy. She stares back. Down here, she looks darker, bigger. Scary even. I wouldn't want to get close to her. But, then, she smiles at me. Nice, friendly smile. Did I stare too long? Mom says I sometimes do, and it's not polite. I turn away. Does she watch me, too coming in, going out of our building?

There's a mass on Sunday. I hear the organ, the singing. Mom is Catholic, but she's not religious. Only goes to church on holidays. Or when someone gets baptized or married. Dragging me along.

Tourists keep sitting on the steps. Like nothing is going on inside the church. Even the gypsy doesn't budge. But people leave when the priest and his assistants stand on the steps, waiting for churchgoers to come out. Except the gypsy. She turns towards the priest, gets up,

shakes his hand, and stands next to him. Imagine that! They're like old friends.

The priest talks, shakes hands. The gypsy bows, smiles, talks to everyone who talks to her. But she doesn't shake hands. She cups her right hand out. Many actually put coins into her palm. She pockets the coins quickly before the next person comes. The priest asks for money, too. But one of the altar boys does that for him. With a cloth bag at the end of a stick.

I'm sure the gypsy hit jackpot that morning. But I bet she didn't get as much as the priest did.

Next day, Monday, the gypsy isn't there. A big man stands in her place. Bald head, dark brown skin like hers. He also sticks his hand out to beg, but I never see him sit the whole day. He's ashamed, too. Maybe, more than the old woman.

I miss the old gypsy. In one short week, she's become a regular part of my day. I'm actually glad to see her back on Tuesday at her usual place.

For weeks, I watch her. Greeting, talking, begging next to the priest. It's like the last ritual of mass. I don't look out the window much anymore. But after breakfast, I check if the gypsy is on the church steps.

This morning, two policemen in blue uniforms and shorts ride by on bicycles. I've seen them before. They pass our building, case the island, and leave. Today, they stop, lean their bicycles on the church walls. They approach the gypsy.

One of them talks to her. Then, the other takes her by the arm, makes her get up. She shakes off his hand. They

can't get her to budge. It's like she's a plant who's taken root on the church steps.

People watch from many feet away. They're afraid to get involved.

Without warning, the gypsy stiffens. I gasp as she falls butt first on the steps. She thrashes her legs, but her arms and body are stiff. Like logs. The police bend over her. I'm scared for her. She's so old. She might die. Here, away from her home.

One policeman talks on his radio. The gypsy lies stiff on a step, an arm and a leg hanging over lower steps. She looks dead. I've only seen people die on TV.

Men from restaurants below us talk to the police. In loud voices. They're arguing. Maybe, the men are blaming the police for what happened to the gypsy. How annoying that I can't understand what they're saying. Words are gobbled up by these thick stone walls. They come to me as echoes.

I hear a siren. An ambulance comes, stops by the church. The police clear the area around the gypsy. Paramedics fuss over her, then they lift her onto a stretcher. They don't cover her face, like on TV for people who die.

At least I know the gypsy's alive. But will she be back? I'd like to know what happens to her. I hope she'll be all right.

I tell Mom what happened. She listens. Calmly. Then she says in her patient voice, "Well, Jesse, she's a gypsy. I'm sure she's a *sans papier*."

"A what?"

‘She’s not a legal resident. You know, like Mexicans who cross the borders around San Diego. She’s not French.’

“Will they throw her out of France, then?”

“*Alors*, she’s not from an EU country. Maybe, they’ll escort her to the border or give her a plane ticket to wherever she’s from. *Je ne sais rien.*”

“So, she’ll go back home?”

“Maybe, but I doubt she has one. A lot of them camp out. They like the outdoors I guess, and set up camp at different places. Sometimes, they stay in one place, but often they move about. They must like the freedom, living that way. She’ll be back, you’ll see.”

“I feel sorry for her. No home of her own. And so old. She’s comfortable on the steps. Maybe it’s like home to her? How awful they’re kicking her out. She’s no bother to anyone. People give her money only when they want to.”

“I feel sorry for her, too, *mon chou*. *Mais, on ne sait pas quoi faire*. What can we do?” Mom shrugs, and walks back to the kitchen.

I’m just too sad. Because of the gypsy. But my Dad makes me sad, too. He hasn’t written. Where is he? He’s all alone now. Has he been feeling bad, like Mom?

I open my sketchbook to my drawing of the gypsy, alone on the steps. Maybe, I’ll draw people around her. Now that they’ve taken her away, people are back on the steps.

Summer will be over soon. I’ll be going to school—a French school, because I’m now French and live in Paris. I’ll have new friends. I hope so.

Okay, I'm afraid. Will I like the school? Will my French school like me? I want them to think I'm French. Not like the dark old gypsy. Well, I speak French, she doesn't. I'm white, not dark. But people say I look like my Dad. And Mom used to tell him, "The French will know right away you're American."

So, will my school think I'm American? But I'm not anymore. My home is here now, so I'm Parisian. But what if Mom is wrong? You don't become a Parisian just because you live here. The gypsy lives here. Maybe grew old here. But she's not French, Mom says. And they threw her out. What am I supposed to think?

But Mom is French. So I am French. Can't be that easy, though. I still don't know how to act like a real Parisian. I'll learn, Mom says. But how long will it take me? The gypsy never learned. That's why she sat on the steps, begging.

