

Last autumn we asked for entries to The British Guild of Travel Writers' 50th anniversary Travel Writing Competition, in association with *Traveller* magazine. The judges' decision on the winning entry was unanimous. We were charmed to bits by **Sheila Killian's** account of a trip to Paris with her young daughter, and hope you will be too.

IN PARIS WITH YOU

MY GIRL STANDS ON THE TINY

balcony of Hotel de Nice with the red morning light in her face. Beyond her the sun hits the square towers of Notre Dame. It's very, very cold. She's saying goodbye to Rue de Rivoli, storing up Paris. It will always be there for her now.

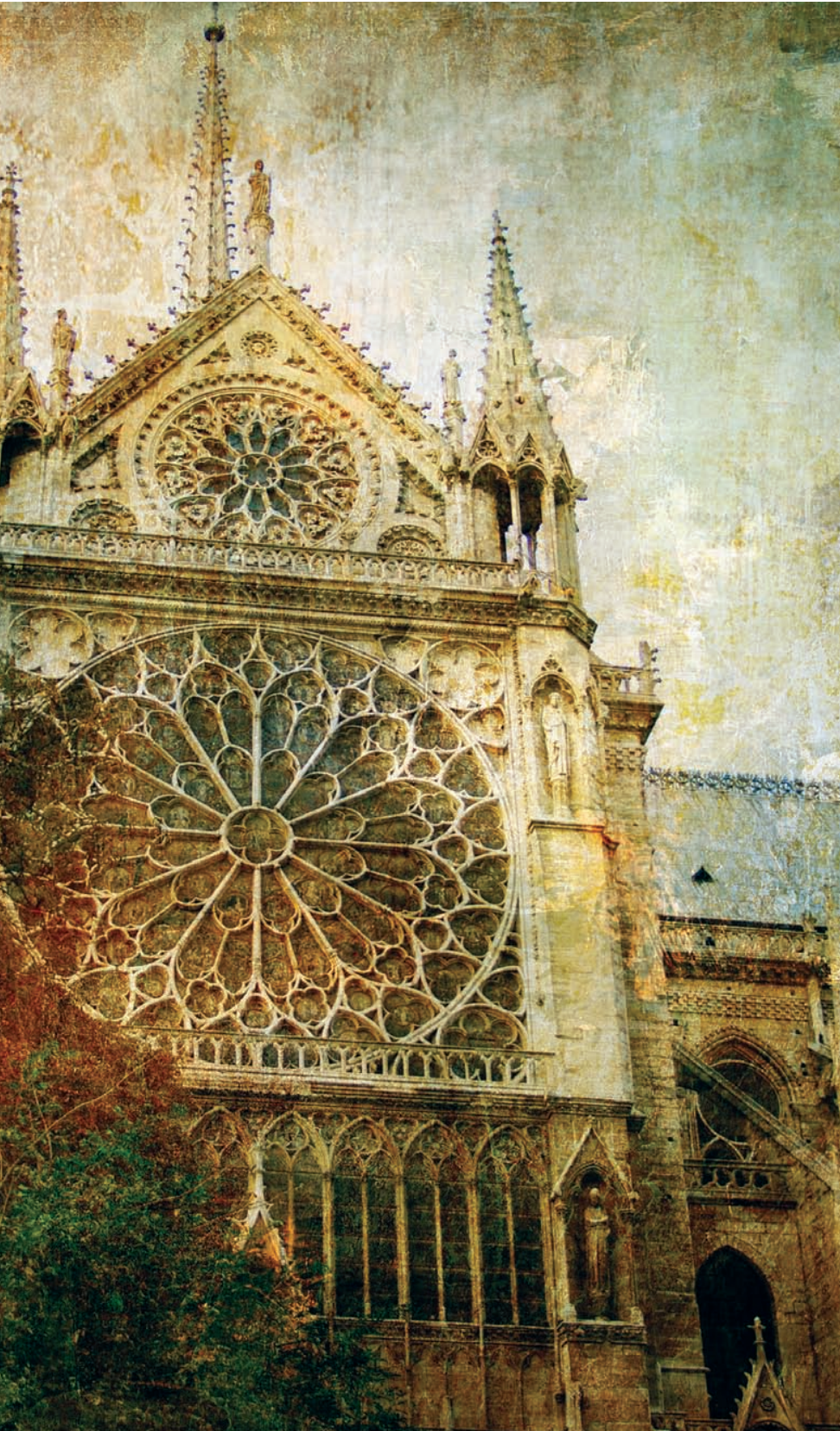
She didn't know what to expect from this trip. Neither did I. It was an impulse, just the two of us, not a family trip. I was thinking of my mother, the times we went on the train to the sea. She took just me, the youngest. I remember us sitting, watching Roscommon turn to Galway out the window, the wheels clacking on the track, spelling out our names. I was just on the edge of childhood, discovering journeys.

She is quiet on the plane, and the bus that hums past wet tennis courts and dark, leafless trees. She brightens in our tiny, attic chocolate-box of a room, wallpapered in red brocade over every inch of wall and ceiling, even the wardrobe. Two windows open onto the street, one with a tiny metal balcony above the heart-stopping loveliness of warm sandstone buildings up along the Rue de Rivoli.

The first evening we cross the river to Notre Dame; just a few hundred metres, but it takes hours. Paris at her pace means stopping for photos of *velibs*, dogs, Christmas trees. It means endless wandering in the gloom of Notre Dame, lighting candles, studying statues, taking slow, blurry pictures. Next day at the Louvre she picks up a map and takes charge. I follow her straight to the Mona Lisa, pelting down corridors past Italian statues and Greek treasures, weaving through groups of Japanese schoolgirls, on a quest. We find the famous face, small and blurry behind glass – after that, we can wander. We find ourselves in the gold room housing Louis IV's crown, and marvel at the size of the diamonds. She can see why there was a revolution. There are cases of tiny gold boxes, studded with jewels and enamel. She chooses her favourites, pretends to be the queen. She could spend all day here, and we very nearly do.

The long walk up Rue de l'Université wears her down and we stop in a small *brasserie*. The prices are outrageous, but her face as the waiter swoops a *crepe au chocolat* in front of her –





“pour mademoiselle” – is beyond price. We turn a corner to find the Eiffel Tower arcing above us like a discarded Christmas ornament. There is a long cold wait to get inside, an ear-popping lift to the top.

“Worth it,” she says.

We are high in the sky over Paris. The Seine snakes below us through a blur of biscuit-coloured buildings, a gold dome here, a monolith there. We take our time, freezing through a hundred photos, soaking it in. Back on the ground we warm up with salty chips. She buys her brothers tiny, metal Eiffel Towers from the North African vendors. At the Trocadero, a rock band is making a video using the Tower as a backdrop. We wait to hear them sing, to see if they’re famous. She watches people dancing, and almost does herself.

We pay nine euros to climb the 284 steps to the top of the Arc de Triomphe. She’s back to life, and bounds ahead of me. When we surface, darkness is properly falling, and all the white lights suddenly spark to life along the Champs Elysées. The Tower behind us lights up in blue, and some pure magic descends. We stand there quietly for ages with nothing to say. We’re watching the sky growing darker, Paris growing brighter, and we know we’re in a perfect place.

Back at the hotel, I read the Louvre guide, and realise we missed the Venus de Milo.

“Oh well,” she says. “We mustn’t have really wanted to see it then.”

She’s right, of course. We’ve seen plenty of things. She watches, all the time. She sees how girls on the metro part their hair, the red hats of pre-school children, the way that stooped old lady moved through the tourists in the half dark of Notre Dame, invisible, crossing herself and lighting a candle. She watches a girl in four-inch heels on a tiny silver scooter, elegant ladies with elegant dogs, the way the evening wind lifts the baubles on the tiny silver Christmas trees in the square. She watches and I watch with her.

She’s standing on the balcony that last morning, and I remember it’s my mother’s birthday. I start to tell her how we went to Galway together, listening to the train. I don’t have to explain much. She’s right on the edge of childhood, and she understands all that.

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