

PROLOGUE
PARIS

“The proper time to influence the character of a child is 100 years before he is born In each of us lives our childhood and the values of past generations.” –Robert ten BenseL, pediatric psychiatrist, Mayo Clinic

Paris, Summer 1963. In what is supposed to be the most glorious of cities, in a beautiful month. “I love Paris in the springtime,” my mother used to sing in her overdramatic 1940s’ style around the house. And it’s the mythical pre-Kennedy assassination Eden of American innocence. The United States is flush with cash. The exchange rates are great and Americans are flooding Europe.

As a present for my bar mitzvah, my mother took me on a trip through Europe, mostly with one of those If It's Tuesday It Must be Belgium tours. But on that day, I cannot say why, we are by ourselves. My mother's main goal during the trip was to accumulate large numbers of long gloves and ingeniously designed perfume bottles.

But my father chose not to come. It wasn't a problem of excessive work or inadequate money. He was his own boss and only employee in a development company organizing and producing apartment buildings. It wasn't money because they changed their Thunderbirds every year or so and at some point, a few years later, would move into Mercedes.

Like so much of what happens in families, especially mine, there was little communication. I understood vaguely that he had no wish to ever revisit Europe for he had been there in the late 1930s, obviously at a time when fascism was on the rise, and had some bad feelings. Inescapably to myself, I never asked any questions about the trip or his motives. In the garage was an old photo framed of himself and a friend, not identified, riding bicycles in Holland.

Somewhere I got the vague notion that he had been there on the eve of war and had to get out fast to avoid the fighting. Or he had seen the Nazi regime first-hand. The second might be true but not the first. When I find the record on Internet of his return voyage—who could have imagined such things would be possible when I was growing up—I found that he came into New York on the *Britannic* on August 15, 1937.

He was a tall and strong man ("Strength is Happiness--Napoleon" it said in his high school yearbook), but he was born in 1913 and thus was 28 by Pearl Harbor day. And despite his look of invulnerability, he had more than one Achilles heel, to mix the metaphor, a bad back and a hernia to be specific. Thus, being 4-F he didn't get a second trip a few years after courtesy of Uncle Sam. So he wasn't there with us that day.

The flea market was supposed to be one of the fun places where you could find anything and everything. I still have a weak spot for flea markets. Somehow, even though I never buy anything for myself, I have the sense that if I look hard enough I will find something so amazing, unexpected, and unique that it would change my life.

And in a sense that already happened. It was a bright, clear day. The sky was cloudless; the crowds were thick but not so much as to inhibit enjoying the colors and variety of goods on display. I lingered at a table looking at old medals, mirrors, the junk of history after the people are worn away. Like my son today, I needed some diversion whenever my mother looked at the jewelry which always seems to predominate in such places. Then, I turned to the left and walked across the little lane to join her as she sorted through earrings or necklaces.

A woman was standing behind the counter of the stall. She was no older than my mother. Far younger than I am now. Brown hair, average height, her slightly curling hair resting on her shoulders. Wearing the kind of dress people make fun of today, full and flowery, little style for someone in Paris where the cliché about everyone having a flair for fashion really seems true.

She looked at me and gasped. Her face showing something between panic and terror. My mother was still looking at the objects on display but for her I was the object on display. I was confused and looked over my shoulder but there was nothing there, and when I looked back she seemed frozen to the spot. Even my mother sensed something was going on.

Finally she managed to speak, in highly accented English, either assuming that was our language or perhaps she had already exchanged a word with my mother, probably encouraging her to look at something particular, offering a price, doing business. I must have moved toward my mother for protection in the unfamiliar situation.

“Your son,” she said with a cracked voice. “Your son.”

“Yes,” said my mother in her pseudo-charming tone. “He is.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head too quickly for it to be a normal gesture. She was crying. Passersby were staring, though mostly indifferent. She probably couldn’t express herself well in English any way but given her emotional distress she could not speak at all. “He...my...I...He looks like my son.”

I must have been a cynical 13-year-old because my first thought was that it was some sales’ pitch to soften my mother up to buy something. She turned and ran and picked up her purse, shaking, frantically reached into the large bag, pulled out several objects and let them fall to the ground in her hurry. Then she grabbed something from deep within and turned back. In both hands, as if she didn’t trust herself to continue at all.

She held it up with a note of triumph. It was a black and white photograph. Of a boy. My age. If he didn’t look like my double he could easily have passed for me.

“He died in Dachau, the concentration camp,” she added quietly.

The rest is a blur. I simply cannot remember what was said, though I suppose not a lot. Today, of course, I would have spent an hour talking with her, taken her name and address, asked the story of her life. I seem to remember and I’d like to believe that we spent a decent time talking to her. But I did not know then and I do not know now if my being there was something of great comfort or terrible torture for her. I’d give a lot to go back to that moment, but then I’ll bet there were moments she’d give a lot more to be able to return to, and perhaps to change.

I never spoke about that experience with my mother, who soon returned to the hunt for perfume and gloves. In fact I have never repeated this story to anyone before this moment.