

When I was at the age of 23 my mother took me aside, sat me down and gave me the greatest gift she could have possibly offered at that time in my life. "For 23 years," she said, "your Father and I have fed you, clothed you, educated you, and to the best of our abilities we have protected you from the bumps and bruises of life. Now we want you to go away, go as far away as you possibly can. Go and find out who you are."

So I moved to Paris.

I left a small town whose roots were buried deep in the red clay country of South Georgia. It was a town of twenty thousand souls who wore the same clothes, lived in the same houses, ate the same food and thought the same thoughts. Sameness was passed down like a birthright from one generation to another. Difference was anathema and most every elder son aspired to grow up and become his father: to take over his Daddy's car dealership or farm or, at the most ambitious, become a lawyer just like Dad. When I told my friends I was moving to Paris it was as if I announced I was going to drop off the edge of the world.

And it was like dropping off the edge of one world and into another. The sights, the sounds, the smells, the taste – Paris was a strange and wondrous place, a total assault on all of my senses and sensibilities. For the first weeks I'd find myself standing stark still on a street corner completely dazed from sensory overload. For 20-plus years my life had been a hermetically sealed affair, cocooned in an over-familiar protective shell of a large extended family and a town where everyone knew my name and my business. Now I was alone in a place that couldn't have been more unfamiliar, and I was absolutely enraptured by it.

Although I was supposed to be studying medicine, I would endlessly wander the Paris streets, reach-

ing out to run my hand along the gray limestone of centuries-old buildings, or columns, or statues just to make sure they were real. I'd stand dazzled under a white and pink shower of blossoms as the breezes softly stirred the horse chestnut trees of the Tuileries and I'd would drift

into a *fromagerie* or *boulangerie* just to inhale the heady, unfamiliar-but-totally delightful aromas. And the people who looked so much like me were at the same time so exotic – their language, their clothes, their smells, all so different. I'd walk the Champs Elysees purposely rubbing shoulders, making physical contact with these wonderful creatures just to make sure they existed. I wanted to reach out and hug it all, to absorb it all so that it would become a permanent part of my being. I wanted to touch, to taste, to feel, to absorb it all so it would always be mine.

For the first few weeks I made it my business to explore as many streets and alleys of Paris as humanly possible. Of course, there was the Eiffel Tower and Invalides and the Notre Dame but it was the small side streets of the Marais and Belleville and Montmartre where people did their living that constantly drew me. The open air markets with their heaping mounds of unfamiliar vegetables and goggle-eyed fishes, whole rabbits hanging with their livers dangling next to unplucked pheasants and ducks. Paris life was the corner cafés where I could stand at the zinc bar and drink espresso and cognac, hanging a Gauloise from the corner of my mouth while absorbing the conversation of the 'blues' – the blue-covered workmen who were taking a break from sweeping the streets or janitoring a neighborhood building.

And it was on these rambles that I found the men of Paris who would play such a pivotal role in my life. It was in the allée behind the Orangerie that I found Guy, a slim, elegant gentleman 30 years my senior and a Baron. Guy gave me entrée to a Paris that a hayseed from Georgia would have never experienced on his own.

Guy gave me a Paris of early morning rambles through the Marche aux Puces looking for lost

dazzling reds and blue of the stained glass of St Chapelle. He gave a world of museums, the art of Gerome and Duchamp, Houdon, Ingres and Braques and Picasso.

He gave me dinners of ortolans and pressed duck in blood sauce. He gave me afternoon teas at Fouchon with warm madeleines and

wiches and rumped sheets; the glories of sex on a priceless 200-year-old Aubusson or on a Louis Quatorze chaise.

And then there was Mark who found me wandering on the quay of the Seine on a warm summer evening. He was a lanky philosophy student with a shock of blond locks that cascaded uncontrolled, framing limpid blue eyes. He made it his mission to "fill the vacuum between the ears" of an uncouth American. We spent long evenings with student friends in heated debate on the worth of Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir and of the Mahabharata; staggeringly drunk evenings in the caves of Boulevard Saint Michel with bottle after bottle of raw red wine and Gitanes. The magic quiet evenings of exploration of self and of honesty and truth always ending with a tumble into bed, abandoning the cerebral for the physical.

Mark introduced me to the enchantment of the Cinematique and the history of world film, of sitting in the dark enthralled by *The Rule of the Game* or *Riffifi*. Mark's thigh pressed into mine. Mark gave me the excitement and freedom of a mind unfettered to run though ideas and ideals, through flights of fancy and the ridiculous.

And Phillippe gave me music. The thrill of my first opera was experienced buried high in the fifth tier of the Palais Granier, nestled under the outstretched arms of gilded putti as the glories of Puccini wafted up from far below, Phillippe's fingers slowly working their way down my vertebrae, the soft puff of his breath

in my ear as Mimi softly expired in Rodolph's arms. He gave me pianos and voices in the recital hall of Chatlet, late night jazz in the smoky cellars of Montmartre and the boom of the giant organ that filled Notre Dame. These were all gifts of Phillippe.

Thirty-three years later my mother is just a shell of her former self. Ravaged by age and multiple strokes, she lingers in a South Georgia care facility. We are not sure if she is really there, as she no longer speaks. She compliantly holds your hand, sitting quietly or dozing gently, never saying a word. When I am alone with her I take her hand in mine and draw close to whisper memories in her ear. I tell her my stories of the Amalfi and Agra, of treks to Macchu Picchu and Nepal, of the vast grass expanses of the Masi Mara, of drifting down the Nile lying on my back in a felucca watching the millions of stars strewn across the sable of a Sahara night. But it is when I reminisce of Paris, the Paris she gave me, that her brown eyes become big and liquid, she leans almost eagerly into me and I swear there is a soft squeeze of excitement in her grasp as my Paris memories become a part of her. ▼

When Richard Slappey isn't traveling the world, he's cooking delectable delights in a high-rise kitchen above Burlington.

Memories of Paris



When Richard Slappey's mother told him to go as far away as possible, he moved to Paris, a hayseed among the fleur-de-lis.

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Renaissance paintings, hours of prowling through the bowels of the Louvre with patient explanation on the glories of the Ruben tapestries or the mystery Cyclade sculpture. He shared his love of the majestic simplicity of Parisian Romanesque architecture and the exhilaration of the

Proust. Guy gave me entrée to the salons of artists and actors, of politicians and of the fashionable and the disreputable. He gave me the Paris of the leisured and the rich: afternoons of impassioned sex in a canopied bed followed by tea on a silver salver served by the butler; cucumber sand-