



How the Hunchback Ate My Cat

A Parisian Christmas Story

by Maryvonne P. Fent • art by Christian Slade

I GREW UP a few blocks from La Rue Mouffetard, one of the oldest streets in Paris, which will remain forever linked with my recollection of the very first crisis in my life. Located on the Left Bank, it runs south, winding down from a fair-sized hill that houses the Luxembourg Gardens and the Panthéon. On the north side of the Luxembourg, the Boulevard St. Michel flows down toward the River Seine, carrying streams of students to the Sorbonne and the renowned faculties that have made their home in the Quartier Latin for hundreds of years.

Nowadays, the Rue Mouffetard is a hip street where rich Parisians remodel the ancient buildings into hi-tech lofts and skylit artist studios, but I remember it as a smelly street

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blending the ripeness of melons with the sour smell of venison, an almost medieval street, wet and slippery from the hosing of the daily open-air market.

In those days, more than anything I wanted a cat, but wasn't allowed to have one. To make matters worse, Michel, our next-door neighbor's son, owned the largest black cat I had ever laid eyes upon; it was huge and had recently looked even bigger as it wobbled around, swinging its distended belly close to the ground. I spent hours watching it and wondering how I could get a cat like that or, at the very least, a cat so unique, Michel would have to concede to me.

Christmas was almost upon us and, unusual for the season, the weather had remained dry and clear for weeks. The high skies sparkled with brutal light, and short gusts of Arctic winds found their way up the tortuous market corridor. From the middle of the street, one could hear the shrill barking of a pet seal the fishmonger kept in a slimy wooden playpen, to the delight of customers young and old. The seal was always the children's first stop, and for a few cents, customers could buy a handful of yesterday's catch to feed it, and no one seemed to mind the fishy fingers. Arranged on beds of slick green-and-black algae were many varieties of fresh fish, displayed like trophies on tiered racks, so fresh they appeared to look straight at us with their round, unblinking eyes. A bare electric bulb swung free over them, drawing sequined rainbows on their scaly backs.

That Christmas, the street was more alive and colorful than ever before. Every night truckloads of vegetables arrived from Normandy, Brittany, and the Loire Valley. Winter blood oranges came all the way from Spain; avocados, peanuts, and grapes from Algeria; jars of green and black olives from Greece. Honey, thyme, rosemary, oregano,

basil, and lavender came from the South of France, along with sunny table settings and painted Christmas figurines that region is famous for. All the varied goods were propped up side by side on a slant to afford a better view.

Farmers dressed in regional costumes sold their eggs—white, mottled, and brown. They had brought baskets full of pungent cheese, ripe Camembert and Brie, chunks of blue-veined Roquefort, thick fresh cream, and salted butter. Other merchants had set up tables with homemade sausages and pâtés that reeked of onion and garlic and forced free samples of their specialties upon the shoppers.

I liked walking the length of the market, clutching my mother's hand or shopping bag. Though I pulled on her skirt when she stayed too long in one place or got busy gossiping with neighbors, I didn't mind it when she stopped near Mr. Dupin's *boulangerie*. I never tired of peeping inside the open basement window beyond, where ghostly-looking men dressed in white pushed long wooden boards loaded with dough into the mouths of roaring ovens and retrieved crusty golden baguettes. The tantalizing smell would pull me closer and closer as surely as a rope until I was halfway through the window.

Everyone agreed that Mr. Dupin was a good baker, but as a confectioner he was hailed as an artist, for he celebrated each new season with a tableau he made out of chocolate. For Easter he would sculpt large, bittersweet church bells that sheltered light brown chocolate squirrels and birds, white chocolate rabbits, colorful roosters, and reddish hens that sat on nests overflowing with tiny eggs. In summer he might give life to chocolate starfish, sea horses, and mermaids swimming with dolphins and whales. In autumn his display would be lined with brown leaves and groves of chocolate trees sheltering does, bucks, and playful fawns. But his Christmas displays had always been

my favorite, and that year he outdid himself with a tableau in which he had Santa fly his sled high over a gingerbread model of the Rue Mouffetard, whose sidewalks and roofs were crowded with an army of chocolate cats.

There were cats of all kinds hidden in the display, from



the sweetest, fuzziest white to the darkest, bitterest black you can imagine. Little cats, big cats, sitting cats, jumping cats, arching cats, spitting cats, growling cats, dozens of cats found their way into his Christmas tableau. One of them was truly awesome; it was nearly black, maybe ten inches long with a high,

arched back and its tail raised straight up in the air. It was the classic cat one might see on a wine label or an old lodging sign. I can still remember how much I wanted it and how I hinted, pointed, asked, pleaded, and even begged for it, but for reasons of her own, my mother made a point of ignoring me and offered a ride on the merry-go-round instead.

The old-fashioned merry-go-round usually sprang up overnight at this time of year. It spun its stiff-legged menagerie up and down under the freshly painted marquee, next-door to the church of St. Médard, for the Rue Mouffetard was such a national treasure, it came complete with its own church. To be honest, St. Médard was less than remarkable and stood gray and solemn like a praying nun across from the first stalls of the market. Around the church stood a flowerless garden, a narrow, graveled space with worn benches shaded by leafless chestnut trees. A

row of scrawny bushes had been planted along the low, forged-iron fence that enclosed it, and it looked empty next to the bustling street.

No one ever sat on those benches in winter, except on Sunday when bunioned old maids and wheezing World War I veterans rested for a few minutes to catch their breath on their way to Mass. No one, that is, except for the church's own Quasimodo, a short but powerful feral creature with a limp who acted as a groundskeeper and spent a lot of time in that garden. He gathered the fallen chestnuts and leaves, trimmed the bushes, swept the church, and took an unexpected pride in polishing the brass fittings that adorned the thick oak doors of his keep. Mothers used his name to hush children into obedience, and I had heard the concierge from across the street swear that he was a gargoyle come to life, as anyone would have figured out if one would just have bothered to count the remaining gargoyles on the church's roof.

In spite of Quasimodo, St. Médard was a solid neighborhood church, and except for Sunday mornings when Mass services kept him away, the priest of St. Médard was a familiar figure at the market. He moved from stand to stand with a large shopping bag, exchanging pleasantries with his parishioners, bargaining for Christian prices and small favors, a figure of modesty in his shiny cassock and frayed collar.

I had just turned five and a half, and my mother's refusal to buy the chocolate cat for me was a red-hot insult to my budding sense of entitlement. Children in those days were dependent on their parents for money, and in my case, she was it. I did not have a dad to cajole out of a few francs, and certainly no one in my neighborhood had ever heard about free enterprise and children setting up lemonade stands or newspaper corners! That kind of activity, if witnessed, would have flagged abject poverty reminiscent of Fantine in Victor

Hugo's *Les Misérables*! As it happened, when an opportunity to raise my own money presented itself, I seized it with unexpected and precocious business flair.

At the time, my mother worked for a printer, and she often brought home leaflets and publicity inserts for me to play with. The day she gave me a box full of colorful pocket calendars for the coming year, I saw my opportunity! First I finagled her permission to go play downstairs with the local kids, which was easy since I did so almost daily when the weather permitted. When she left the room, I filled my skirt with calendars and headed down the stairs. To make sure she wouldn't see me by leaning out of the window, I set up shop in a doorway around the corner from where we lived.

The rest was easy. Wearing the eager, innocent look needed for the job and not giving a thought to the fact that my mother would have died of embarrassment at the mere notion that people in the neighborhood might think she had put me up to that little commerce for gain, I hailed passersby and neighbors, asking them to buy my convenient pocket calendars. Most people were amused, and the calendars were so colorful and cheap some bought more than one, and some even tipped me! Before long I had sold half the stack and had more money than I needed to buy the coveted chocolate cat.

Exhilarated, I ran all the way to the confectioner's, way up on the Rue Mouffetard. Though the baker's wife, who tended the store in the afternoon, looked puzzled, she didn't say anything. A sale is a sale, and the cat was mine. She enveloped it carefully with wrapping paper and put it in a brown bag. All I needed to do now was bring it back to our apartment without my mother seeing it. I couldn't wait to show it to Michel, the neighbor's son, and establish once and for all that I owned the most remarkable cat in the world.

I was rushing home with my new treasure, jubilant at how smart I was, when I recognized the silhouette of my grandfather leaving the tavern where he sometimes played backgammon with his friends. Guiltily, I hid from door to door, hugging the wall until I reached the church's garden. Once there, I looked around and was relieved to see I was alone. Noting where I was, I shoved the paper bag between the thickest bushes I could find and got up just in time to skip toward my grandpa and throw my arms around his neck. If he was surprised to meet me this far from my usual playground, he never showed it, but he firmly took my hand and led me home.

I worried all night about my cat. My dreams were filled with cat creatures, saber-toothed tigers, pumas, panthers, and I couldn't wait for dawn to color the slate roofs of the buildings across the street. I got up early and watched for clouds, but the day promised to be cold and dry. Though the market opened early, it took hours for my mother to get ready to go, and when we got there, the shopping dragged on as she made her usual stops. Sitting on pins and needles, I was dying to get away to check on my cat. I didn't even care to feed the seal. I think it was the worst day of my short life. Unable to wait any longer, I pleaded for permission to wait for my mother by the merry-go-round next to the church. She acquiesced but not before making me promise not to talk to strangers—which I promised, even though my commerce experience with the calendars had clearly demonstrated that strangers were not as dangerous as she implied.

Free at last, I ran all the way to my hiding place in the garden. The bushes stood green and neatly trimmed, their small, dustless leaves shining in the white winter sun. I parted the scratchy branches, under which I had hidden my treasure, but couldn't see the brown paper bag anywhere.

Confused, I was retracing my steps from the previous day when right there, on one of the benches, I ran into the hunchback.

He must have been working on the hedge, because his tools lay beside him on the bench and he seemed to be appraising his handiwork. Turning his malformed neck away from me, he threw a sideways glance in my direction, then quickly looked away, but something must have aroused his curiosity, because he changed his mind and faced me. Though he sat very still on that cold bench, he was a formidable and disquieting figure. I forced myself to look into his eyes and knew that I should not, but I had to ask: "Did you find my cat?" He scratched his chin with the palm of his left hand and squinted to think before answering. Finally he looked back at me, all four feet of me, and pointing a stained finger at the tree, he said haltingly: "Cat—go—up—tree—maybe?"

Unable to utter a word and barely aware of the icy wind gusts licking at my bare legs, I fought back the tears I didn't want the thief to gloat over. As I turned to walk away, the

creature wiped his right hand on his clothes and, turtlelike, stretched his short neck out of his hunched back to smile at me, revealing two rows of chocolate-stained teeth.

After all these years, I can still remember how scared and angry I was as I

ran back to the safety of the crowded merry-go-round to wait for my mother. After so much work, it just didn't seem fair to end up empty-handed—and to make it worse, I couldn't even complain about it! But deep down, the



whole adventure was tinted by the bitter taste of my lying. Who in their right minds would go through that much conniving to show off a chocolate cat? The whole affair now appeared meaningless and dangerous, and I was glad it was over as I took my mother's hand to go home.



I remember it snowed that year. For days the weather had been cold and dry under an ice-blue sky, but a powerful Siberian blizzard descended upon us, and overnight, Paris found itself buried under several inches of snow. In the days that followed, all the children on our street spent hours throwing snowballs and building snowmen, and I happily forgot all about cats, so it was quite a surprise when on Christmas morning, I found a black kitten hiding under the tree. No need to say I was thrilled, speechless . . . and somewhat worried. Something about my mother's eyes told me she knew more than I cared to imagine, but then, she always knew what she needed to know to keep me safe. At that moment, as I threw my arms around her neck, I decided never to lie to her again, a decision I have never regretted.



Whenever I return to Paris for a visit, I slip away from family and friends to reclaim the street of my childhood. I wonder about old Quasimodo. Where is he now? And Mr. Dupin, the artful baker? Would his wife remember me if I showed up at her door? Had she told my mother that I had come alone and bought their largest chocolate cat? I walk up and down the street, but the bakery is gone and the stores of the Rue Mouffetard have lost their medieval look and scents. The storefronts are freshly painted, the awnings are new, the sewers have been enlarged, and the paved street repaired, but those reflections of modern life can never touch my memories of that early Christmas. 