

## Chapter 1: Paris, My First Teacher

Before life scattered me across oceans and ambitions, there was Paris — my first teacher, my first love.

It began with five francs (about one U.S. dollar at the time), a pastry, a cigarette, and a bench I had quietly claimed as mine, though no one else knew it.

To some, Paris is the City of Light. To me, it was simply home—where the sidewalks smelled of fresh baguettes and morning wine. But Paris was not only shopping windows and the scent of bread. If you looked closely, you could still see the war: a wall pocked with bullet holes, a faded sign half-swallowed by time, courtyards with cobblestones missing. Even as a boy, I noticed such things—though I lacked the words to explain them.

At the marché, the women selling vegetables wore thick shawls. They would hand over potatoes or carrots with a quick smile, but sometimes their eyes lingered a second too long, as if they were somewhere else entirely. The men in the cafés smoked until the air turned gray, speaking in low voices that sometimes lifted into bursts of laughter... and then, without warning, a sentence beginning, “Before the war...”

On my walk home, the city revealed both faces at once. Boulangeries rose like cathedrals of scent—brioche and baguette lifting like incense—while nearby façades still bore the wounds of war: chipped stone, peeling paint, windows patched long past necessity.

Here and there, remnants of the Occupation clung on stubbornly: faded posters half torn from the walls, their slogans illegible but their silence louder than words. Children like me sometimes peeled scraps of that paper for fun, making toys out of ghosts we did not yet understand.

Though rationing had ended, its shadow lingered. Housewives bargained sharply, measuring every carrot as if tomorrow might not bring enough. Sausages looked generous but everyone

knew they'd been stretched with breadcrumbs. My mother would smile, counting her change, reminding me that "enough" was already a kind of wealth.

And then—just a few streets away—the shop windows glittered with defiance. Mannequins in tailored coats stood at attention, shoes polished to mirrors, scarves in impossible shades of silk. They whispered another Paris: not survival, but style; not scarcity, but elegance.

I pressed my nose to the glass and believed them. Scars and elegance were not opposites. They could exist together, in a wall, in a window, perhaps even in a person.

Mostly, I cared about my religieuse pastry and whether I could get to my bench before it tipped sideways, chocolate oozing onto my sleeve instead of my mouth. But somewhere in me, I was already learning that lesson: chipped edges didn't ruin the picture—they made it worth looking at twice.

My childhood was woven into the cobblestones: dodging bicycles in narrow alleys, chasing pigeons across sunlit plazas, balancing on the edge of curbs and daydreams, and mastering the fine art of looking intellectual while doing absolutely nothing at all—a skill that later came in handy when I taught philosophy.

Paris taught me early that life is not a straight line. It is a winding, beautiful mess of conversations, pastries, and unexpected detours—and that the best moments often come when you're lost or at least slightly spun around—ideally near a bakery or a café.

The Bench, the Pastry, and Five Francs

When I became an apprentice, I earned five francs a week—a fortune, if you squinted hard enough. Every Friday, I could hardly wait to collect my wages, the coins practically burning a hole in my pocket before I even left the building.

My first stop was always the pastry shop, where I would proudly trade a few francs for a religieuse—a magnificent, two-tiered pastry shaped like a plump, edible nun. The top was a small puff, just larger than a cherry, perched delicately atop a round base the size of a small orange, cloaked in glossy chocolate and filled with rich cream. A scandalous joy for a fourteen-year-old with no sense of restraint—and I had none.

I would cross the street to my favorite bench, sit down like royalty, and devour it. Within minutes, chocolate and cream would be all over my face, my fingers sticky, and my dignity nowhere to be found. But I did not care. I had earned it. Every messy, glorious bite. More often than not, Pierre, who was a sewing machine operator and worked at the same atelier I worked, would see me first, grinning that lopsided grin of an older brother who knows all the stories you're about to tell before you speak. Pierre teased, grinning as he shook his head:

*"Toujours la religieuse, eh? One day Mademoiselle will smell the chocolate on you before you even reach your sewing machine — and then it won't be me teasing you, mon ami."*

"Careful, petit frère, if you eat any more pastries, we'll have to sew you a new pair of trousers by next week!"

I laughed, but secretly worried he was right—then took a bigger bite, determined to risk it. If growing up meant new trousers, so be it. After wiping my mouth with the back of my sleeve—like a true Paris street kid, no napkin, no shame—I would light one of my weekly Parisiennes. This rebellious little pack of four cigarettes I bought at the corner café-tabac was made of the darkest, roughest tobacco imaginable—originally produced by the French government for soldiers who could not afford a full pack.

I'd lean back, cough dramatically after the first drag (because I was fourteen and still tragically human), and watch the world go by—convinced, with all the certainty of youth, that I was now a man. Five francs in my pocket, chocolate on my chin, and a cough that reminded me manhood was not as elegant as in the movies. Still, I kept puffing, convinced each bluff added something invisible to my future self.

Sometimes, I would catch my reflection in a café window and hardly recognize the boy staring back—chocolate—smeared, smoke trailing, eyes already busy writing novels about the future. There was a kind of delicious loneliness in those afternoons—a private feeling of being both invisible and invincible at the same time. If someone had asked me then what freedom meant, I might have answered: a pocketful of francs, a pastry in hand, and no one waiting at home to scold you for being late.

I learned early that independence was not always glamorous; sometimes it meant cold fingers in the winter and an empty stomach when you miscalculated your francs. But each tiny hardship felt like a badge of honor—proof that I was becoming someone new, someone I'd built from tiny rebellions and sweet rewards.

Sometimes I would sit there so long the sun would slip behind the buildings and the streetlamps would flicker on, one by one, like sleepy fireflies. The city would change costume for the night—out came the lovers, the poets, the mysterious women in silk scarves who looked like they carried entire novels in their eyes. I invented stories for those figures—convinced every silk scarf hid a secret, every midnight walk a promise or a regret. Paris belonged to all of us, but in those evenings, it felt like it belonged to the watchers and the dreamers most of all.

I imagined what their stories might be: a quiet heartbreak tucked into a pocket, a stolen kiss on a bridge at midnight, a letter never sent. The café terrace transformed into a stage set under moonlight, where every passing figure played their part in my private theater.

### Toward Becoming

My “salary” barely covered pastries and bad tobacco—but at fourteen, that felt like wealth—even if the cream on my face made me look more mischievous than mature. In my heart, I felt rich beyond measure.

Sometimes, I would watch the older men nearby, arguing passionately about politics or poetry, their gestures sharp as knives, their laughter echoing across the square. I studied them carefully, imagining my future self among them, swirling wine, and making philosophical pronouncements I barely understood.

The year before, at eleven, I won the Paris Junior Chess Championship—not because I was brilliant, but because I was patient, willing to sit still and think three moves ahead. My father, Jacques, however, worried I was spending too much time indoors hunched over a board. He wanted my hands to hold brushes and charcoal, not pawns and bishops; a useful skill for a life of reinvention, though I didn't know it yet.

And as I sat there, fourteen and already half-claimed by the adult world, I dreamed. Of grand adventures, of walking through cities I did not yet know. Of elegant suits, long conversations over wine, and a life stitched together by curiosity, ambition, and a touch of daring. And perhaps, quietly, I also dreamed of love—of meeting someone who might understand the wild, tender hopes tucked inside a boy who smelled faintly of pastry cream and black tobacco.

So, began my Parisian education: fashion from the ateliers, philosophy from the streets, and personal hygiene lessons from melting pastries.

I did not understand love yet—but I knew when a brioche was worth crossing the street for, especially if it had chocolate filling and the baker’s daughter was the one handing it to me, pretending not to notice my red ears or nervous grin.

When you are fourteen and armed with five francs, a cigarette, and a head full of dreams, the world seems ripe for the taking. But Paris, kind as she was to a boy on a bench, could be a little less forgiving once you stepped onto her busy streets looking for your place.

My first real leap toward independence came not with a grand ceremony or a noble announcement, but with a pair of worn-out shoes and a nervous handshake. I found work at a famous couturière's atelier—in those days, the only way to learn a trade was to become an apprentice. It was one of those tucked-away places in Paris where life hummed along to the steady rhythm of needles, steaming irons, and the occasional colorful curse words that would make even the models blush.

As I sat on my favorite bench, the last of the pastry cream still sticky on my fingers, I watched the world with a mix of envy—pretending I was not halfway between boy and man, and quietly hoping someday I would find my place between those cobblestones and clouds of flour.

Pierre, three years older, was an artist in his own right. He treated me like his little brother and protected me from the 16 to 18-year-old girls who flirted, teased, and thoroughly enjoyed my blushing discomfort. I was naïve. They knew it. Pierre? He found it all hilarious.

That workshop became my proving ground, where I learned the craft—and myself. I started to notice the subtle shifts: the way I carried myself, the way I responded to the girls’ laughter, the way I began to anticipate Pierre’s dry humor before he even spoke.

Even the smallest tasks felt significant, as if each task and every shared joke was a step toward adulthood. Some afternoons, I would close my eyes and hear the soft snip of scissors and the low hum of voices, mingling like music.

It was in that noisy harmony that I felt my world expand from a pastry-stained bench to the promise of something bigger.

In the hum of needles and the swirl of conversation, I found a sense of belonging I had not known I was missing. Looking back, I realize that was the summer I first understood what it meant to come into my own.

And somewhere in the chaos of pins, fabric scraps, and teenage crushes, I started to recognize a version of myself I rather liked. Not fully formed, not polished—but curious, alive, and quietly determined.

There was no applause, no certificate, no official moment of “arrival.” Just the slow dawning that I was changing—and that perhaps, for the first time, I was choosing who I wanted to become. And Paris? She was still there, winking at me from across the street, as if to say, “Bien joué, petit.”—“Well played my little boy.”

## Chapter 2: The Atelier of Becoming

Pierre could sew a perfect seam with one hand and tap the back of your head with the other, never losing the cigarette hanging from his lip.

Pierre carried himself like a man born in a tailor’s chair. His hair was always a little too long, his shirt never perfectly pressed, his ties permanently stained, yet his stitches could hold their own in the finest boutique near Avenue Montaigne. He swore he’d once sewn a hem while riding the Metro—and knowing Pierre, it might even have been true. He spoke to me in a mix of French,

Yiddish, and whatever stray English phrases he'd picked up from American films, most of them unsuitable for polite company. I'd smile and nod, pretending to catch his drift, even though most of his words tumbled past me in an avalanche of slang and laughter.

But I understood his hands—shaping fabric, giving silent lessons. In the language of tailoring, he was fluent.

Pierre had a way of making the workroom pulse with life—quick jokes traded with Claudine, dark proverbs muttered as he pinched a seam, the lingering smell of tobacco and starch hanging in his wake. When he left his chair, everyone noticed.

Marcel, the presser, was a different kind of artist. His iron was both weapon and confidant—he would lean over the board, muttering to it as if the cloth itself might decide whether to obey. He had the posture of someone who had spent a lifetime bent over his work, but his eyes were sharp and mischievous, always ready to catch you making a mistake. He claimed to have pressed coats for the Queen of Belgium and a handful of famous actors, though depending on the day, the story contained more wine than truth. ¶ Marcel smelled of steam and stories, his white work shirt always slightly damp and rumpled, his humor as dry as yesterday's baguette.

He pressed not just coats for royalty, but the air itself into memory. His voice carried through the room before lunch—teasing apprentices, cursing at his battered iron, sometimes humming half in Polish, half in Parisian slang.

Pierre's cigarette ash had a will of its own. It clung impossibly long, bending in crooked crescents, then collapsed in one grand tumble across the worktable, sending apprentices into a scramble to brush it away before it burned through cloth. He never apologized—just grinned, flicked his wrist, and carried on, as if ash were part of the design. His corrections, too, were

wordless: a single raised eyebrow, a muttered proverb in Yiddish, or the dramatic sigh of a man too burdened by other people's crooked seams. For me, each sigh was a sermon.

Marcel, meanwhile, drank his philosophy as much as he spoke it. "Steam is the soul of cloth," he would declare, his breath ripe with wine, leaning over the board like a priest over an altar. He claimed an iron could coax memory from wool, press arrogance out of silk. When his stories trailed off into silence, the hiss of steam filled the gap, like punctuation on a tale no one dared question. To him, fabric was alive—and he treated every lapel like it needed to be tamed, or sometimes forgiven.

Together, Pierre and Marcel embodied an era slipping away. Their gestures, their grunts, their curses belonged to the world of couture before mass production, when every seam was a fingerprint and every pressed seam a small miracle. They were the last echoes of a Paris where clothes were still built to outlive their owners, and where an apprentice like me was not just learning a trade but inheriting a vanishing language. I did not know it then, but watching them was like watching the final sparks of a fire before ready-to-wear smothered the flame.

Only much later would I understand that these men and women were the living memory of a Paris vanishing piece by piece, replaced by polyester, speed, and forgettable edges. In those apprentice days, though, I was too busy sweeping floors and keeping my head down to realize I was learning from masters. Sometimes Marcel would lean over, catching my eye with a wink. "If you're clever, you'll learn to press your luck as well as these lapels, *petit*." And I tried—oh, how I tried—not to disappoint.

And then there was Claudine, the elegant head of the seamstresses. She belonged to another era entirely—one where a well-made dress could still change a woman's destiny. She did not simply give instructions; she issued decrees. Her voice could slice through the chatter of the workroom

like a lion tamer's whip, but when she spoke of the old masters of couture, her tone softened—just slightly—as if she were remembering a lost amour. In her eyes, every seam told a story, and every apprentice, no matter how green, was part of a lineage worth protecting. Her approval was precious, a glance from her worth more than a week's wage. We did not know the old Paris was dissolving outside. We just tried to dodge her sharp instructions and earn a hint of her rare smile. They were my accidental teachers—men who never lectured, only taught through grunts, sidelong glances, and the occasional insult. From them I learned that pride lives quietly in a finished edge no one notices until it is wrong. The pay was humble, the hours long, and the tasks so repetitive. And yet there was satisfaction—a wealth measured in skill, not francs.

*Mademoiselle* was a relic from another century. She insisted on "*Mademoiselle*," never Madame. I was her coffee boy, a role that made me her favorite—or at least the one she had not fired yet. She called me "*mon petit Roger*." She could scare off suitors, interns, and perhaps even a few bishops and presidents with a single look.

My first tasks were simple: sweep the atelier floors and, each morning, bring *Mademoiselle* her ritual breakfast—coffee, strong and black, always accompanied by her cherished croissant or, depending on her mood, a tartine with confiture or a delicate brioche. I would deliver it to her legendary apartment at 31 rue Cambon, an address whispered among the fashion elite and known only to a privileged few. Few were ever invited inside; to me, dusting her Buddha and straightening the lucky elephants became silent ceremonies. The apartment buzzed with secrets, superstition, and the faint scent of ambition. Though she preferred to sleep at the Ritz, this was her creative sanctuary. Superstition lingered in every corner—Buddha statues, elephants with raised trunks, the omnipresent Number 5.

On quiet mornings, when I dusted the Buddha or straightened the elephants' trunks, I whispered silent wishes—half hoping her luck might rub off on a boy still learning which end of the needle was up. Sometimes I'd stand, dust rag in hand, staring out her tall windows as Paris woke up below. The bells, the rush of pigeons—everything trembling with purpose and possibility.

Maybe she liked my silence, or the fact that I never dared spill her coffee, or perhaps it was just fate's small whim.