

une petite fille

PENNY KITTLE

“We must start people looking: now. Give me the phrase book: how do you say small girl? How you say blue skirt? Please help me find it,” my hands are shaking and the pages stick together.

Pat approaches a distracted security guard.

“Say, ‘bleu chemise et blonde—’” I prompt.

The young man glances at us, the radio casually resting against one ear, “*Il est une petite fille avec un bleu chemise et blonde cheveuse?*” He speaks rapidly into his radio, grins, then looks away.

In the static that follows I feel my heart hammering and I squeeze my son’s arm until he squirms away.

“Non,” crackles across the silence.

Even I know what this means.

“*Non? Merci.*” He shrugs his shoulders and we turn to each other.

Non?

Where is she? Our eyes sweep across the crowds of people lounging, chatting, buying small plastic gargoyles, then back to each other. Pat drops his gaze to my trembling upper lip, “Don’t panic; we’ll find her.”

I turn back towards the door we came out of. “I’ll check the bathroom,” I start forward, then turn back. “You stay with Cameron; stay here.”

I race down the steps to a bored woman keeping watch.

At the gate I shout to the stalls, “Hannah! It’s Mom! Answer me—” as I dig in my pocket for francs, “Please, Hannah! Are you in here?”

The silence echoes across the cool cavern; closed doors silently watching on each side.

I turn and scramble up the stairs to the open square before Notre Dame. Again the crowds of people calmly taking pictures, smiling, speaking languages I don’t know, eyes invisible behind dark sunglasses. One of them could have taken her—he could be holding her hand and moving down one of those side streets—which one?—but there are so many—and she is smiling sweetly up at him, trusting him. She’ll never be in my hand again.

Lord, please.

Bring
her
back.

I'm still standing, spinning to see in all directions, while deep inside I'm on my knees. *Please.*

I've lost her.

I will never leave this spot.

I regret every careless thing I've done.

I can't breathe.

Please, no.

Hannah had called, "I need to go to the bathroom," but we had waited two hours in line, climbed hundreds of stairs to get to the top, could she wait just a minute so we could see the view? The only thing I saw was framed in the lens of my camera: Champs Elysees; the river with a few scattered boats and the twinkling light of the sun across the deep green water; the sculptures tall and thin on spires unseen from below: a privileged view. Gargoyles peered out over the city. Bells rang deep and low in the distance. Just one more, and another. Entire lives change in a moment like this.

Click.

Click.

Click.

"Where's Hannah?"

"What?"

"Where is she?"

I take in the whole of the balcony in one furious glance. Not here.

I'm running, but my legs feel slow and weak. I spring to the spiral staircase, balancing the palm of my hands against the cool stone walls to leap two at a time, pushing past tourists, "*Excuse moi, excuse moi, pardon,*" but there are so many steps, more than I remember. Down and down and down.

"Hannah?"

"HANNAH?! *Excuse moi, pardon,* my daughter; have you seen a little girl?"

"Non—non—*femme négligente!*"

She's nine: still so trusting and loving in that pale blue skirt and sandals. She's spunky. And she's impatient. *Now, Mommy, Now.* I burst out the door onto the square before the cathedral and see a chaos of color and form—movement and light—but not my daughter: my only one, this gift I begged for.

Please.

Pat is beside me; his eyes are wide; his skin pale.

We wait and watch as panic spins around us, faster and faster. I'm choking.

We can't look at each other.

Cam is beside me; I hold one of his hands in both of mine. "Have you seen your sister?"

"No."

"What should we do?" my voice breaks.

And suddenly there she is: her blonde hair moving in the wind behind her as she steps towards us, light glancing off her bracelets, a smile parting her lips. A small grin and, "I'm sorry, Mom; I told you I had to go to the bathroom," as she falls against me. Her glasses dig into my shoulder.

Don't pull away just yet, sweetheart, let me smell your hair.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

I won't be careless again.

I promise.