

Parents



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Innocents Abroad

A father's vulnerability is revealed when he and his child become crime victims.

By Nicholas Fox Weber

My eight-year-old daughter's journal tells it best:

"We got off the train and went inside the train station. As we were going along, a woman came up. She held a cigarette close to my dad's eye and asked directions. Then we got to the cab line, and my backpack and my dad's backpack were gone!"

There we were, parent and child, on what until then had been a perfect journey. This was the last leg of our travels before we joined the rest of the family. But while the prospect of three days in Paris had seemed to be a dream come true, our arrival there was more like a nightmare.

The woman at the Gare de l'Est must have pegged us as easy marks: a father confused because the place where the taxis discharged people was not the same spot where one could hire them; a little girl dazed by the crush of people; our overloaded luggage cart. Naturally, when she came up to me with an open map in her hand and a quizzical look, I turned to answer her questions. That glowing cigarette tip a few inches from my face alarmed me, but rather than say anything about it, I simply summoned up enough French to say I could be of no help. It was only a minute later that I looked down and realized that, as I had turned to re-



Far from home: Their backpacks stolen, father and daughter try to pull themselves out of the dumps.

spond to what had been a deliberate distraction, my inquisitor's accomplice had taken our precious backpacks.

And I do mean precious. Lucy's journal again:

"I was very upset, and my dad was more upset than me. My notebook on the trip was in there. The one I'm writing in right now, I'm writing from memory to make up for the one that was stolen. My favorite bunny was in there, too."

Sleepy Bunny was the small and worn stuffed ani-

mal she had clutched ever since she was a baby, and had belonged to my wife throughout her childhood. Lucy had said that she felt as though there was a wire between Sleepy's heart and hers and that she dreamed of her children's children having him. And then there was the journal on which Lucy had been working diligently throughout the trip, recording not only the sights and people and meals but also the peculiar little things a child notices and deems memorable. And her school workbooks

and wristwatch and hairbrush... the list goes on. As for my backpack, I didn't mind so much the thieves' having my camera and radio and Swiss Army Knife as I did their having the things that could never be replaced: the two thick file folders of work notes, all my expense receipts and business papers, the address book that linked me with ten years' worth of acquaintances—and the photographs of Lucy on the merry-go-round in a small French village.

Rationally, of course, it was not a tragedy. No bodily harm had been done. I still had our passports, traveler's checks, and tickets safely in my breast pockets. But the feeling of being violated, of being unable on some level to protect my child, of having her precious trust in life so abruptly shattered, stung. I felt anguished—both vulnerable and inept. We charged to the station's police office, where my French got remarkably good. But the situation was hopeless; they assured me that the thieves were already far away.

"My dad shouted words he doesn't usually like me to hear, and then we got into a taxi cab and my dad all of a sudden burst into tears."

I had not actually burst into tears, but I had lowered my face in misery, and Lucy had quickly told me that the one thing she

SERGE NIVELLE

Innocents Abroad (Continued)

could not stand was to see me so upset. But it was hard to mask my anguish. Here, precisely when I was trying to expand Lucy's knowledge of the pleasures and possibilities of life, I had inadvertently led her into a situation that could inspire nothing but a sense of fear and loss. For whatever reasons, I lost all perspective; when I telephoned my wife to tell her about the event, my first comment was that this was the end of Lucy's childhood.

Healthy children have little interest in sustaining pain. As soon as they can, they resume the business of enjoying themselves. What was hardest for Lucy was that I had come unhinged; a child cannot stand to see a parent fall apart.

My job was to change the mood and to do some more basic things, such as get my child to eat. After the robbery, Lucy's stomach was tied in knots. Usually a great eater, she said she couldn't think of supper. I had to figure out how to get her going again. So in the city where I had planned to extend her list of favorite dishes to include some new and exotic choices, I was overjoyed to discover that the hotel kitchen would provide canned chicken noodle soup, grilled-cheese sandwiches on white toast, and a soda with lots of ice. The menu worked for both of us; restored by it, we donned fresh clothes and went for a walk. Lucy began to joke and make plans for the next day.

"Today I woke up to a wonderful surprise. My dad said he would not say no at all. So he took me out and got me this notebook and a heart-shaped locket. He also told me that every cloud has a silver lining and this was the silver lining."

I had always hated the "Every cloud..." cliché. Here, however, I was happy to put it to use.

We all have such high expectations of travel with children. These are the moments for which we have saved our money and planned; they are supposed to be sacrosanct. The truth, of course, is that unpleasant realities can hit at any time. The best we can do is give our children the sense that even if something has gone wrong, more happy living lies ahead. ●

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