Emergency

Down and Up in Paris

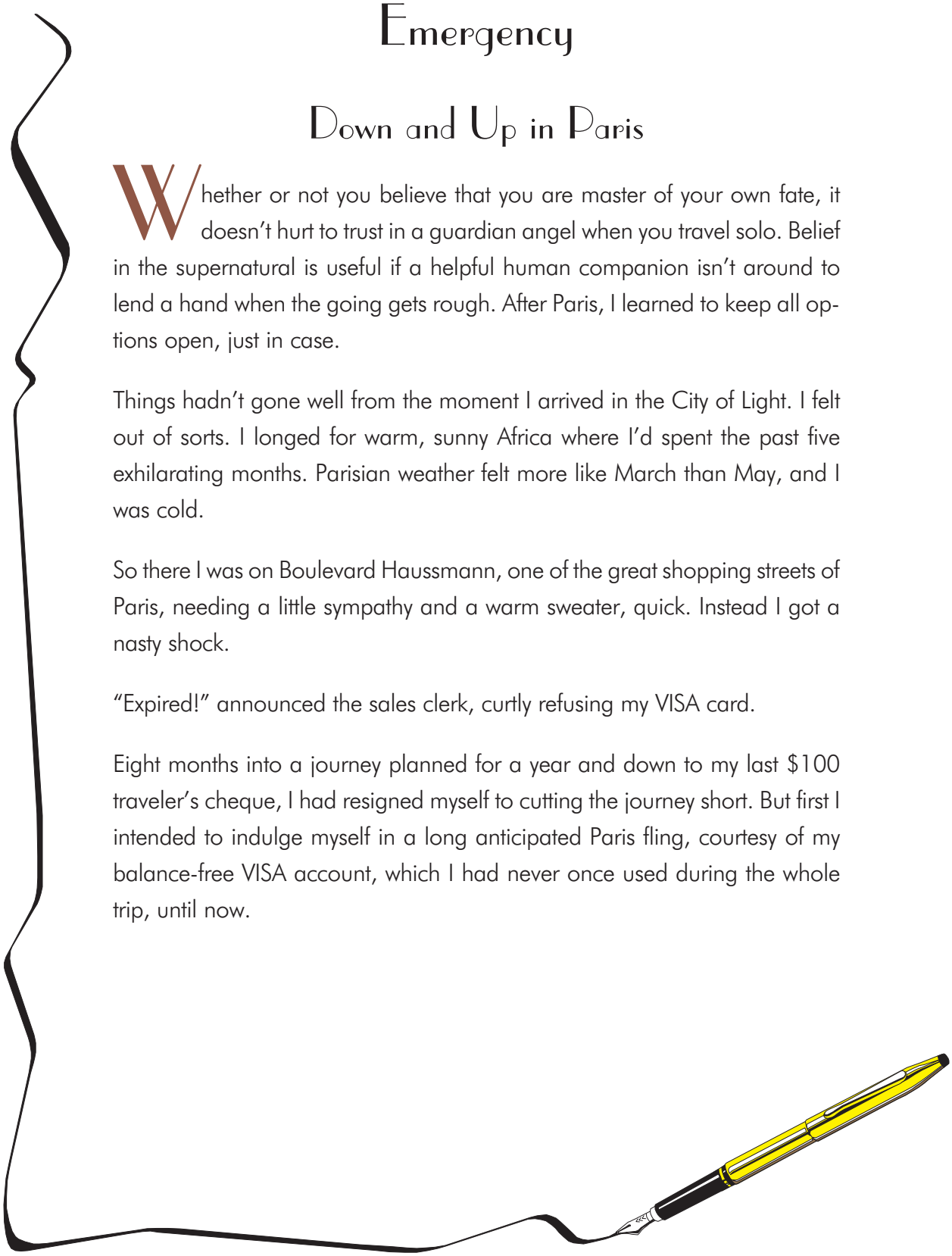
Whether or not you believe that you are master of your own fate, it doesn't hurt to trust in a guardian angel when you travel solo. Belief in the supernatural is useful if a helpful human companion isn't around to lend a hand when the going gets rough. After Paris, I learned to keep all options open, just in case.

Things hadn't gone well from the moment I arrived in the City of Light. I felt out of sorts. I longed for warm, sunny Africa where I'd spent the past five exhilarating months. Parisian weather felt more like March than May, and I was cold.

So there I was on Boulevard Haussmann, one of the great shopping streets of Paris, needing a little sympathy and a warm sweater, quick. Instead I got a nasty shock.

"Expired!" announced the sales clerk, curtly refusing my VISA card.

Eight months into a journey planned for a year and down to my last $100 traveler's cheque, I had resigned myself to cutting the journey short. But first I intended to indulge myself in a long anticipated Paris fling, courtesy of my balance-free VISA account, which I had never once used during the whole trip, until now.



HOME
SWEET
HOME
SPIRITUAL
MATERIAL
LIFE
EXPERIENCE
MEMORIES
AWARENESS
EXPANSION
STRENGTH
signed
date
DIRTY
WASHING
BANK
BALANCE
$00.00
FUTURE?

To have this woman tell me the card was useless was more than just an embarrassing incident. Never mind the sweater. Never mind an evening at the opera, or clubbing at Moulin Rouge. I hadn't even money enough to pay my hotel bill.

Realizing the depth of my predicament caused a sickening lurch in my stomach. I snatched the card back from the clerk and glared at it in disbelief.

How could this be? I had certainly checked the dates before leaving Canada and had definitely made a point of ordering a new, updated card. I couldn't believe it, but no doubt about it, the card's validity date clearly said that it had expired three months earlier. Plan as you will, you can't always reckon with tricks of fortune.

I left the store empty-handed and trudged the streets shivering while I gradually pieced together prior events that had conspired to put me in this unpleasant quandary. I recalled the wallet-snatching incident seven months earlier in Darwin, Australia. At the time, I had been badly shaken to be robbed but counted myself lucky to have lost only my pride, a little spare cash, my driver's license, and my VISA card, which I promptly canceled.

Fortunately, with the help of family at home, the card had been replaced, and the new one was delivered to me in Australia by a friend who happened to be passing that way. It took two weeks to catch up with her, but we finally crossed paths in Sydney only two hours before I caught a bus for Adelaide. I was so thankful to see her and the new VISA card, I quickly tucked it away for safekeeping without even checking the dates. And tucked away it remained, untouched, unnoticed and unused until that blustery, rainy day in Paris seven months later. Normally a new card is good for at least two years; it never occurred to me to think otherwise.

Normal, however, is no acquaintance of destiny. Alone, down and out in Paris, I received no help, as I normally should have done (so they told me later), from banks bearing the VISA logo. Clerks and officials seemed indifferent to my plight. An expired card is a useless card. Neither a replacement card nor emergency funds were possible while abroad. A transfer of funds from my home bank could be arranged, but only after the three-day holiday weekend, which was just about to begin. Sorry, bank closed.

As these were the days before ATM's (automated teller machines) were in use, a transfer of money by wire was the only solution. Five months earlier, in Johannesburg, South Africa, I had arranged to withdraw from my bank account, all but $500, which was reserved as my welcome-home kitty. I prayed that meager sum was still intact and that transfer fees and long distance telephone charges would not gobble the dollars up before I got my needy hands on them.

Meanwhile, until banking hours and time differences aligned on my side, I had to survive three anxious, practically penniless days not loving Paris at all.

Imagine being in Paris and agonizing over whether to spend a few francs visiting the Louvre or eating lunch along Champs-Élysées – at McDonald's.

Friday and Saturday passed gloomily. Sunday morning, having read that admission is free on Sundays, I set out by Metro subway for the Pompidou Center (*Center Culturel Georges Pompidou*) a popular spot housing a library, modern art museum, galleries, theaters and restaurants. My gray mood conformed well enough to the drizzle-laden, overcast sky as I approached the complex from a dingy side-street. I first set eyes on a collection of modern outdoor sculptures: huge red lips, writhing green snakes, and multicolored plastic whirligigs spouting water in a fountain. The building itself looked as if it had its insides out. A garish monstrosity of glass, metal tubing and duct work painted in primary colors, the whole scene struck me as tawdry, not at all the gracious classical architecture I'd expected in Paris.

Yet, curiously, the place attracted throngs of visitors. The library was so popular a long queue waited for entrance, and inside, people reading books lolled all over the place. Everyone looked relaxed and comfortable. From a top floor lookout, I could see, spreading in all directions, the spires and domes of the splendid, monumental Paris I had come to see. And in the plaza below, I saw that crowds were gathering around street entertainers, mimes, jugglers, and musicians. Laughter and applause rose in the atmosphere. I began to see that this was a Paris of fun and fancy, free from the formal restraints demanded by its more sophisticated elements.

Upon that realization, I looked up and caught a shaft of sunshine breaking through the clouds, and instantly, the pall of gloom I had worn like a shroud for days fell away. I felt good again, and I was glad to be Paris, even if I was broke. Leaving behind my woes, I hurried down to join the cheerful crowd outdoors.

With a new, improved disposition, it wasn't long before Paris worked magic over me. I wandered the streets munching a *crudité* (submarine sandwich French style). I laughed at the antics of street clowns, hummed along with singers and musicians. I window-shopped. I watched children playing in the amusement park at Forum des Halles and arrived at the famous Notre Dame Cathedral just in time to catch a free concert. I rambled and marveled to discover that you can have a grand time in Paris for free, or almost free.

On Tuesday, I finally got through to my bank and fidgeted nervously while the clerk checked my records. At last a friendly voice came on the line and said, "You have $1,500 in your account, Ms Redfern. How much shall we send?"

Fifteen hundred dollars. Surprise!

Well now, the plot thickened. While I was greatly relieved to know that I could pay my hotel bill without resorting to begging on the streets, I wondered, where the heck had the money come from? If I had arranged, five months earlier in Johannesburg, the transfer of all but $500 from my bank account, how come I still had $1,500?

It was a mystery. I remembered having been annoyed at the time, in Johannesburg, that my own miscalculations had led me to expect more money than I actually received, but I figured banks are never wrong, and I would simply have to be more frugal than planned. My plan had been to linger in South Africa or Kenya at some peaceful, inexpensive seaside location and work on some writing ideas. Instead, dwindling funds kept me moving; the perfect haven never materialized, and now, unexpectedly, here I was in Paris with time and money at my disposal.

Once again I contemplated a spending spree, but something told me it was time to get my finances and my life back on track. That meant going home and asking some questions.

Why had VISA issued a virtually useless card? VISA officials could not explain, except to say it should not have happened. Why had I received no help in Paris? Again, that should not have happened.

Why hadn't my bank sent the money to me in Africa when I asked for it? Well apparently bank errors do occur. In this case a transaction I initiated, not in Africa but earlier on in Australia, had shorted my account by $1,000. The mistake had been corrected two days after the South African transfer of funds was completed, by which time I was on the road again, none the wiser.

Coincidence? Destiny? Divine intervention? Who can say? But of all my travel tales, I love most to retell how a seemingly negative chain of events brought me to the exact place I needed to be to fulfill my wishes. As luck, or fate would have it, I arrived back home in Vancouver just in time to snap up a rental unit high on a hillside overlooking the sea, at exactly the price I could afford. It was the perfectly peaceful spot I had looked for but never found in Africa. With a few extra dollars in my account and three months to spare before my leave of absence expired, I had time, and the means to launch the writing career I had been dreaming about.

When I decided to devote a year of my middle life to traveling, I hoped the experience would amount to more than a mere extended vacation. I hoped that expanding my horizons would lead to a wiser and stronger me. I hoped for a real change of life. In fact my solo journey of discovery led me full circle back to the same old place to face the same old challenges. My ingrained fears, prejudices and inhibitions did not vanish because I went abroad. But by going abroad I gained a heightened sense of achievement and a new perspective on living. As for changing my life, I now realize that is a journey in progress.

See Going Solo Tips

Money Tips

— begin again —