# Did You Bring Me Anything? [1]

September 21, 2015 Flash Nonfiction [2]
Family Stories [3]

## Flash Nonfiction by Lisa Cox

### Before Sephora and Lindt Were in Every City



**When I was nine, my mother took me to Paris** for the first time. Back then, we were living in San Diego. Flying across the whole United States and the strange ocean on the other side was more than any kid like me could imagine. I proudly sported Adidas with unending laces and a pink T-shirt; jean shorts overalls hung over my waifish figure. But within days of arriving in Paris, Mom bought me my new favorite outfit—a beige skirt, sky-blue blouse, and Mary Jane shoes.

My mother was not an American in Paris like me, but a Mexican who looked European, with skin that could be pearly or bronzed, coiffed dark hair, and stylish leather heels. It was the early 1990s, and as a flight attendant fluent in French, Mom knew the city well. She'd lived in California for thirty years, but her purposeful stride revealed a confidence I'd never seen at home. Even at the time, I remember thinking she was more like a leading lady than my mother, a glamorous stranger with a secret adult life who knew restaurants and bakeries and plazas in whole cities that only

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existed to me as names spoken into air. I was her audience of one, looking for clues that she was still Mom—the familiar curve of her teeth, the beauty mark above her lip, the syncopated squeeze of her hand that she'd invented for my brother and me.

One evening, she kept me out well past my bedtime for a stroll on the Champs-Élysées. With the Arc de Triomphe glowing candlelight-yellow ahead of us, Mommy pointed to the right and guided me into the grand doors of Sephora.

I was in awe: It was open until midnight! The soaring walls were stacked with towering shelves of perfumes. We plucked bottles and spritzed them onto tiny white strips. We smelled until we could no longer distinguish scents, giggling when we saw the other scrunch her nose at funky-smelling finds. A French perfume would have been exorbitant for a child, but my mother knew I needed a keepsake. She showed me over to some bins to pick out brightly colored bath balls for a few francs each to bring home to friends. The cashier tied up my small treasures in black boxes with red bows.

Those joyous bows and exotic perfumes and a mysterious side of Mom coming to light: I already felt sad without understanding why.

She moved us to rural Virginia after that summer, where she married a pilot who lived on a historic farm and none of her leather pumps made sense. The biggest store in town, a Kmart, had all the mystique of a cow pie. I went to a new school, aggrieved and lonely, where boys wore camouflage and girls eyed me suspiciously. While Mom still flew to Europe, I was stuck in between my two favorite cities—San Diego and Paris—as far away from each as I could be. At times, I hated her for that. For leaving me in that town on the Shenandoah River when she could escape to the Seine. Still, on the days she was due back, I'd anxiously await the crack of crushing gravel that signaled her car coming down our half-mile driveway.

Once inside, she'd lift gifts from her suitcase, and I would forgive her desertion instantly. I'd delicately dissect a Swiss Lindt milk chocolate bar—detaching the red paper etched with gold lettering, carefully unfolding the thin, silver foil that encased the chocolate, which in turn encased a fragile strip of brittle toffee. I'd allow myself one squared chunk at a time, the chocolate melting on my tongue too fast, the toffee sticking between the crevices of my teeth.

Today, I live in Boston. It has a Sephora a stone's throw from a Lindt shop. Sephora no longer sells the bath balls I sifted through as a child; nor does its Parisian flagship store stay open until midnight. The chocolate bar wrapped in red paper is nowhere on my local Lindt store's shelves. My mother is still a flight attendant, but I don't know when I last eyed her suitcase as I used to with all the awe and selfish impatience I could muster, wondering, *Did you bring me anything?*

The farm in Virginia is long gone for both of us. When my mother visits Boston, I show her my favorite places to stroll, to shop, to eat. When my husband isn't around, she and I walk hand-in-hand, her leather pumps exchanged for flats. Though I may have lost the mysterious thread that once emanated from her, the memory gleams as shiny-bright as silver foil.

**Art Information**

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Lisa Cox is a casewriter at Harvard Business School. She grew up in California and Virginia, went to Cornell University, and has lived in France, Costa Rica, Argentina, and Spain. She currently lives in Boston and is one of those people who loves both Boston and New York City equally.

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