When Eric was about nine years old, we had an opportunity to spend a week in a chateau in the Loire Valley in central France. A friend's sister, an even more rabid Francophile than myself, had invited us to take the last of seven bedrooms to fill the place. We met up with six or seven other Americans, rented a couple of cars, and toured chateau country.

The culture, the landscape, the history, the food and wine, the many historic castles of the region are fascinating, awe-inspiring, overwhelming. The small chateau which we rented in its entirety was multileveled, medieval and mysterious. It was built into a hillside surmounted by a tiny village and its interior facade looked like a Spanish villa, facing a large, grassy garden. The imposing front wall was three storeys tall, constructed of uneven rough stone bricks as long as my arm, complete with drawbridge and ramparts. Small caves lining the dry limestone moat had been carved into homesteads by troglodytes, abandoned untold ages before.

I made a particular point of taking Eric to visit the sites of many of the exploits of Joan of Arc, whose story we had studied in preparation for the trip.

We meandered among the crumbling outer walls of the fortified castle high above the river at Chinon, where she had miraculously picked the dauphin Charles from a crowd despite his disguise, proclaiming him the true king of France.

We visited Orléans on May 8, anniversary of the 1429 battle and liberation in the Hundred Years' War, the most famous and heroic exploit of St Joan's career. They still celebrate the date with religious and military ceremonies in the most spectacular holiday pageant and parade I have ever seen. Eric lit a candle at her shrine in the cathedral there.

We went to Amboise and visited Le Clos Lucé, the final home of one of my personal idols, Leonardo da Vinci. The beautifully preserved red brick Renaissance manor is still there, a few blocks up the cobbled main street of the town from the castle. It has been converted into a museum in his honor, and contains many of his drawings, notebooks, and models reconstructed from the plans of some of his more prescient inventions.

There is a window in his bedroom facing downhill across town toward the palatial chateau, the Loire River off to the right, wide and shallow with sandy banks this far east, silhouettes of trees on the horizon reminiscent of so many classical paintings. On the wall beside the window there is a framed sketch. The master had sat and drawn the scene, the view from this very window, almost five hundred years before.

He is laid to rest in a chapel in the elevated courtyard of that chateau, and I left a rose there.

Just to list the highlights and sites we visited that week would take many pages, but the story I would like to tell here is about what happened afterwards on the way to Paris.

How could I take my son to France for a week and then not spend a few days in Paris? The Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay, Notre Dame, the cafés, the bookstalls along the Seine, the chestnut trees, the Champs Elysées… The most apt of the many descriptions of Paris I have heard, I think, is 'the most civilized city in the world.' I had extended the trip for a few days, and had arranged a hotel in the 7th Arrondissement, not too far from Les Invalides. My new friend Mireille, whom I had met on the cross-Atlantic flight a week before, was going to be our guide and show us around as only a Parisienne could.

Our little group was splitting up later that afternoon, my friend's sister Nancy catching a flight to Brussels for business there, one of the couples staying over just for one day, a few people having already left for home. Eric and I were riding up in one of the rental cars with Nancy, the two remaining couples in the other. Our last activity together was to be a visit to the cathedral at Chartres, perhaps a hundred kilometers southwest of Paris.

We had crossed the Loire at Tours that morning, cruised leisurely though a region of hilly family estates sprinkled with acres of vineyards and lined with geometric rows of poplars, and were emerging into the farmlands of the Massif Central.

I took a map of Paris from the glove compartment, and said to Nancy, "I'll try to figure out the easiest way to get to de Gaulle from our hotel after you drop us off. "

“Oh, I’m not going into town,” she said, “traffic will be a nightmare. I’m taking the Boulevard Peripherique.” The bypass highway encircling Paris.

“But how are we supposed to get to the hotel? “ I asked. The 7th Arrondissement is in the southwestern part of Paris, and the de Gaulle airport is situated twenty kilometers northeast of the city.

”Take a bus or cab from the airport. Rent another car.”

“That’s at least an extra hour,” I protested. “And I’m not going to rent a car. We won’t *need* one once we’re there. Besides, it’s on your way. Your flight’s not ‘til 9 or something, right?”

“I just hate the drivers there. The buses run all the time, you’ll be fine.”

I couldn’t believe it. This wasn’t like circumventing Indianapolis on the way to Chicago. Even in a traffic jam, you still look out the window and it’s *Paris*.

“How big is the town at Chartres? I’ll need to hit an ATM for bus fare.”

”There’ll probably be one somewhere,” she said.

After a week, traveling with people you don’t know too well can wear on your nerves. I held my tongue and stared out the window. I could bring up the subject again after we’d done our sightseeing.

One of the main crops in that part of the country is rapeseed, from which canola oil is made. It’s not grown much in the Midwestern US, and I still found the fields an unfamiliar and spectacular sight. In late spring, the knee-high plants are covered with so many tiny canary yellow flowers as to obscure the rest of the foliage. The effect of these fields from the highway is of a rippling, velvety carpet the color of a child’s crayon drawing of the sun.

The golden expanses began to give way to the paler tones of the wheat fields of the Beaune region, which sometimes stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction, the stalks undulating before currents and eddies of the breeze as though caressed by the gentle fingers of some invisible giant.

Then on the horizon beyond those sun-splashed fields, miles in the distance, I saw the asymmetrical twin spires of the cathedral, rising like a mad saint's vision above that tawny sea.

* * *

In ancient times, the Celtic peoples in much of Western Europe practiced a pagan religion. Their priests were the druids. They were nature worshippers, conducted divinatory magicks and occult sacrificial rites. The Romans deemed barbaric many of the native rituals and beliefs in the country they called Gaul, and made every effort to suppress them.

The druids continued to gather annually at a secret cave in the hills, a grotto in which there was a natural spring -- a deep artesian well. They believed its waters to hold mystical powers of healing and rejuvenation. The remote location occupied one of the foci of power - an intersection of the ley lines of magical force crisscrossing the earth, which the pagans had long recognized. Stonehenge is found in such a spot, the Blarney Stone, Easter Island, and the pyramids of Egypt as well.

Every summer in and around this hidden cavern, the druids arrived from all points of the compass to conduct their highest rites, share arcane secrets, swap stories and play their politics. Feasts were held around bonfires that lit up the summer night. Mazes were cut into the underbrush surrounding the grotto, in swirling geometric patterns. Ceremonial walks through these mazes were said to be a meditative path to spiritual enlightenment and redemption.

A hundred years or more before the birth of Christ, a wooden statue had been erected in the cave, beside the sacred well. It was of a woman, sitting on a throne, holding an infant. The inscription read, *Virgini Paritur* -- "The Virgin Who Will Give Birth."

During the decline of Roman imperialism, Christian missionaries spread across Europe, superceding the pagan religion with a new message of love and compassion. When they reached the village near the hidden grotto, they found the local people still worshipping the statue of the virgin and her divine child.

"You've been Christians all along!" they declared, "You just didn't know it!"

The first Christian church at Chartres was built directly over the cave in 67 AD by St. Altinus and St. Eodaldus. Throughout the Dark Ages the town was repeatedly sacked in tribal wars between invading Normans and the native Carnutes, and the church was burned to the ground several times. It was always rebuilt on the same site.

In 800 AD, Charlemagne had conquered most of present day France, Switzerland and Italy, forming a unified Christian Western Europe. He enjoyed friendly relations with the Holy Roman Empire to the east, and was presented a gift by Queen Irene of Constantinople – the cloak of the Virgin Mary, the legendary garment in which she had wrapped the infant Jesus upon his birth. The proverbial "swaddling clothes." This sacred relic was transferred from the estate of Charlemagne to the church at Chartres by his grandson in 876 AD, and remains there to this day.

* * *

Although not without modern appointments, the city of Chartres still maintains an aura of history and tradition that only European cities can. The closely spaced, half-timbered tudor buildings with carefully tended gardens and colorful window boxes line inviting cobbled streets and tree-lined boulevards. A few modern office buildings are situated at the edge of town, where we Americans would develop our suburbs. The number of storeys for any structure is restricted in the old part of the city, much as in Paris, allowing an unimpeded view from all quarters of the architectural treasures around which the cities have grown. For that matter, *everything* looks like it has been there for hundreds of years. They probably severely restrict *any* new construction. The French *think* about this stuff.

The Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres dominates the city around it.