



*Honorable Mention*

## “The Money Belt” By Melanie Vare

Ever since I can remember, my mom’s been warning me about being sold into the sex slave market. It was just everyday conversation at our breakfast table—mom’s version of a pep talk.

“Bad men will pay top dollar for a cute blonde kid,” mom would say, “Now, do you want your eggs scrambled or dippy?”

A few years ago, my mother’s worrying soared to new heights. I informed her I was going on vacation to Paris for a week... alone...

“Melanie! You CAN NOT go alone. Someone will follow you home, strangle you and have sex with your corpse.”

“Mom! Gross!”

“Melanie, You MUST travel with someone.”

“Well, I’m not, so you’ll have to just get used to the idea.”

After a long uncomfortable silence, where I could feel heat smoldering through Mom’s bedazzled Chico’s top, she continued.

“Well, do *even* you have a *money belt* ?”

“No. I’m planning to bring my backpack.”

“Melanie! A backpack can be CUT OFF by professional thieves!”

“Now this might sound a little paranoid,” she prefaced unnecessarily, “but, when you email us about your safety each night,”-- *wait, when did I agree to this?* “ could you always include a ‘code word’ that we both know ahead of time? Just so I know that it is *really* you and not a kidnapper using your laptop.”

*Gosh, you’d think I’d gotten abducted at an ATM by knifepoint once, say on a warm Los Angeles Fall evening in 2007, and for some reason my mother just couldn’t quite get over it.*

Ever since that brief and apparently *not* insignificant kidnapping, the phrase—*Don't worry, Mom*—hasn't meant much. The tables had turned. I no longer felt entitled to disobey Mommy. Instead, in my 30s, I was actually considering listening to my mother for the first time.

Could she be right? Boy, was she spot-on about going to ATMs at night!

I recognized that it was pretty gutsy to travel abroad, alone, just a year after being held up at knifepoint for twenty terrifying minutes. But I was only going to Paris, not Baghdad.

It wasn't that my mom didn't want me to travel. Just the opposite. Her greatest love in life, besides spreading cheese on crackers, is traveling. She and my dad have worn many money belts, all over the world, well...besides the "scary places"... a list that is quite extensive and slightly racist.

I remember receiving warnings such as:

Turkey: Don't go there, men will treat you like their goat.

South Africa: Don't go there, monkeys will come into your tent at night.

Thailand: Don't go there, they have tsunamis. But if you go, stay on a high floor in the hotel and check for trees you can clutch on to. But whatever you do, DO NOT ride an elephant—it might go "rogue" because it's sick of being tethered to a spike.

Singapore: Don't go there, you'll get thrown in jail for spitting out your gum and receive 1,000 lashes with some bamboo thing.

Nicaragua: Don't go there, your kidneys will be removed and replaced with bags of drubgs.

Laos: Come on, Melanie, just kill me now and get it over with.

My mom never gave up; I received terrifying emails about travel stories gone horribly wrong up until the day I left. I tried just deleting them, but the subject lines alone got me gnawing my nails:

I finally had no other choice but to set a Gmail filter on my own mother: All emails from: [melaniesmom@yahoo.com](mailto:melaniesmom@yahoo.com) Send to the Folder titled: "Scary Emails from Mom"

The night before I left for Paris, I made a huge mistake: I checked the S.E.F.M.

folder. Fifteen new emails!

I only opened the last two, which turned out...two too many:

The first-- “If anything bad happens, we will wire you money... although I have no idea how to do that.”

The second-- “Be careful of little kids who might act cute, just so that their scary pimp can jump you.”

En route to Paris, I was completely paranoid and started acting like a lunatic. I even went so far as to bitch out a 10-year-old. When a rambunctious boy at Charles De Gaulle airport accidentally bumped into me, I threatened that if he touched me again I’d “calle policia.” Tears welled up in the little boys eyes and he mumbled something in French to his pimp. *Or, it could have been his mom.*

I continued to maneuver through Paris at this level of suspicion for the first 48 hours. Then, one person after another reminded me that I was in a city nicknamed ‘Gay Paree’—to convey the copiousness amounts of fun this marvelous City of Lights had to offer—and *never* had I been *more* uptight.

Just as I started to let my guard down a little and relax, my almighty American hair straightener exploded. Panicked, I considered hunting down a French flat iron, but in a moment of clarity, I remembered the true purpose of my trip...so I threw caution to the wind, let my naturally curly locks loose, and abandoned myself to the limitless joy to be had in that magical city.

When I got back to my hotel room that evening, I had a new email, this time from my dad:

“Your mother is very worried. Have a super time, but stay off the news.”

I did both.