I’ve always had a thing for Napoleon Bonaparte. After all, he was a pretty amazing guy. In addition to his military exploits, he oversaw the centralisation of the French government, established the Bank of France, got the French people to accept the metric system, reformed the law (the Napoleonic Code still forms the basis of legal process in a quarter of the world), and instituted a tax code and road and sewer systems. He was passionate about wife Josephine, even if he had to divorce her in order to produce an heir, and he was also pretty cute, if the paintings hanging on the walls of the Louvre are anything to go by. He was not perfect, of course. Bonaparte re-established slavery in the French colonies, had mistresses, and was responsible for the deaths of many men, but he has played an undeniable role in the formation of France.

I was in Paris with my thirteen-year-old daughter Lilia, who is deaf and uses a wheelchair. She and I were staying at a hotel was near Les Invalides where Napoleon was now entombed. Although Lilia had wanted to come to Paris to shop for clothes and eat pastries and visit art museums, I thought it would be a waste not to visit this site. I knew that she was aware of Napoleon from a manga history book she’d read, and from TV. I pointed out the entry for Les Invalides in our guidebook.

‘Do you want to go have a look at Napoleon’s clothes?’ I asked her.
‘Yes!’ she said.

I’d ascertained from our taxi ride the day before that Les Invalides was within walking distance. After a breakfast of buttery croissants, I pushed Lilia’s wheelchair past the military academy, past a homeless guy camped out on the corner, past a young woman with pink hair, till we finally came to the entrance of the Military Museum. We’d gotten there early and didn’t have to wait in line for tickets, so we were the first ones inside. A close-cropped guard let us in through a special entrance.

We took a look at dolls dressed in military attire through the ages.
‘How could you ride a horse in that?’ I wondered aloud to Lilia, while pointing to a tin-man costume with a slit for the eyes. There were other figures dressed in chain mail, or in helmets adorned with lavish plumes, or in tunics with baggy red trousers. Lilia lingered before each of the glass cases. I hurried her along. There was so little time, and so much to see.

The guard directed us onto the elevator. We got off at the first floor where there was an extensive exhibit devoted to World War II, including a video showing Japanese kamikaze pilots downing ceremonial cups of sake before they flew off to their destruction.

Lilia was familiar with WWII. As a family, we’d visited the Peace Museum in Hiroshima where she’d seen photos of victims of the atomic bomb dropped by Americans. Later, she had done a school presentation on the bombing, and had won a prize for her painting of the Peace Dome. We’d also visited Himeyuri-kan in Okinawa, a museum devoted to the student nurses who’d died when American soldiers gassed the cave-turned-hospital where they were hiding. On our last family trip to my home country, the United States, we’d stopped off in Washington D.C.
where we saw the statue commemorating the American victory at Iwojima, as well as
the Holocaust Memorial Museum, where I’d hurried Lilia past the exhibit about the
Nazi’s systematic execution of the disabled.

Lilia knew about modern wars, too. Recently she’d started paying attention to
TV news reports so she knew something about the French currently fighting in Mali.
Two months ago, nine Japanese oil workers were taken hostage and killed by al
Quaeda supporters at the Amenas gas plant in Algeria. The terrorists were reportedly
acting in response to French military actions in Mali. The incident was all over
Japanese TV for a couple of weeks, leading my Japanese husband to worry about our
safety in Paris, but I’d already booked our hotel and paid for our plane tickets. Closer
to home, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was threatening to send a missile to
South Korea or Japan or maybe the United States. He was on TV all the time, too.

Now, looking over the exhibits of weapons and military maps and uniforms, I
tried to explain about how various countries were aligned during World War II.
‘Japan and Germany were friends,’ I signed, ‘and France and America were allies.
But now all of the countries are friends.’ Simple, I know, but it was about all I could
manage on the spot.

Still, the evidence of war made her sad.
We moved slowly, from glass case to glass case.
‘Here is the uniform the French soldiers wore in Africa,’ I duly explained.
Then, later, ‘Here is the printing press that the French people who didn’t like the
Germans used to make secret newspapers.’
The room was dark and there were no other visitors. At one point, the guy
with short hair who’d let us in came to check up on us and told us how to get to the
third floor. Then he disappeared again, leaving us alone.

Why had I thought that a visit to a military museum would be a good idea?
Every artefact reminded us of another battle, another war: death, hate, destruction. I
thought it was time to lighten the mood.

‘I think Napoleon’s clothes are in a different building,’ I told Lilia. ‘Shall we
go find them?’
She nodded.
When we reached the last exhibit on the floor I tried to remember how to get
to the elevator the guard had mentioned. I heard footsteps. Another man in military
uniform appeared and offered to lead us.

‘She wants to see Napoleon’s clothes,’ I said, feeling a little guilty. We were
about to turn our backs to the horrors of war in order to observe fashion. How
frivolous we were.

‘Ah, les vetements de Napoleon!’ The man gestured. ‘Come with me.’
He asked where we were from. After I’d explained that I was an American
married to a Japanese man, living in Japan, he said, ‘C’est bon ca!’ That’s good! He
then told me about his own multicultural family. He himself was from Cote d’Ivoire.
His daughter had married a Dutch national and lived in the Netherlands, and another
family member had married a Vietnamese. We agreed that marriage between people
of different cultures led to international understanding. It was very, very good.

When we got off the elevator, the guard who’d first greeted us looked
surprised. ‘Are you finished?’ he asked.
Was it my imagination, or did he seem disappointed? After all, we were the

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only visitors so far, and we hadn’t even gone through the whole museum. He was obviously a member of the French military. I felt the need to apologise for our lack of interest.

‘Elle est devenue triste,’ I said, using Lilia as an excuse. And she was sad. Fighting between countries made her miserable. ‘She wants to see Napoleon’s things.’

We said ‘merci’ and ‘au revoir’ and moved on to another wing of les Invalides. Here, we didn’t need help with the elevator. We went up with a group of gray-haired American men, whom I assumed were veterans. Lilia and I looked at the cases of beautiful swords with ornate hilts. One was in the form of a rooster’s head. Others were in intricate filigree.

We spent a meditative moment in front of Napoleon’s stuffed horse, which was nearly bursting at the seams. Finally, after going through the exhibits of Napoleon’s military campaigns in Europe and North Africa, including his defeat at Waterloo, we moved on to the dome which housed his tomb.

I pushed Lilia in a circle, trying to find the wheelchair accessible entrance. It had to be here somewhere. Most of the tourists were gathered here. Obviously, this was the most popular attraction, and there had to be an easy way inside. I decided to go ask for directions at the information desk.

The young man there said, ‘Je suis desolee. That is the only place here that doesn’t have a ramp.’

I thought I’d better ask if was okay for Lilia to go in anyway. I could help her up the stairs on my own.

The guy showed me his right elbow, which was in a cast. ‘I can’t help you,’ he said.

‘That’s okay. I can do it.’

He shrugged in typical French fashion. ‘Do what you like.’

We went back outside. There was no railing, but I knew that Lilia could make it up the ten or so steps with me supporting her from behind. I told her to put the brakes on her wheelchair, unbuckle her seat belt, and stand up.

She had just taken one step when a woman offered to carry the wheelchair. I hesitated for a moment. In Japan, I had become conditioned to refuse assistance. For the Japanese, there was nothing worse than burdening others. But I needed help. And this woman wanted to help. Helping us might even make her feel happy.

‘Yes, please,’ I said.

Unbidden, two Middle-Eastern men – Lebanese? – grabbed onto Lilia’s arms and helped her up the steps.

‘Merci beaucoup!’ I said, after she was once again settled in her wheelchair.

Inside the dome, it was cold. Lilia wheeled herself to the centre, where there was a large hole. Down at the bottom, was Napoleon’s tomb – a dark wooden casket, which contained coffins within coffins (six in all). Lilia grabbed onto the railing and took a photo.

‘He’s really in there!’ she signed, awed.

‘Yes,’ I confirmed.

I pointed out Empress Josephine’s tomb, which was off to the side.

Lilia took the manga French history book out of her backpack and pointed to the picture of Josephine.

‘Yes, it’s her,’ I said. Once again, I was surprised by how much she actually

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knew, how much she’d picked up on her own.

I sat down on a bench for a while, observing the visitors from around the world. Napoleon Bonaparte was a general, a war hero, who had overseen the killing of thousands, yes, but who had also brought others together. Today, for example, the people of nations formerly at war with each other were gathered here in peace. Like us, they just wanted to perfuse the relics of this great man, enter his tomb, pay homage, and maybe take a photo to post on Facebook. Here were all of these different people co-operating and helping each other, helping us.

When we were ready to leave, I thought that it would be easiest to take Lilia-in-her-wheelchair down the steps backward. It would be a bit bumpy, but I could do it on my own.

Without saying a word, a blond man – Swedish? Dutch? – picked up one side of Lilia’s wheelchair and helped me carry her down the stairs.

‘Merci!’ I called after him. ‘Thank you!’

There were allies everywhere.