

Gourmet

City Guides

MONIQUE TRUONG

MY CHERRY AMOUR

For a novelist whose appetite is intertwined with her imagination, Paris looms large as a place of fact, fiction, and self-discovery. A place to which she can return again and again.



My first memory of Paris is not my own but my mother's. The year is 1974, and she is 31 years old. She is accompanying my father on a business trip, and in order to ensure that they will return home to a country at war, the South Vietnamese government has forbidden them to take me, their then only child. Fresh from Saigon, she speaks fluent French, learned at convent school and honed at embassy cocktail parties. She is *très chic* in her bell-bottoms, formfitting cap-sleeve T-shirts, and giant sunglasses. I know these cherished, crisp-edged details because she would tell them to me just one year later, when the war ended and we became refugees living in tiny Boiling Springs, North Carolina. In Purgatory, my mother would think often of her Paris. The memory continues in this way: One day, while exploring the city by herself, her platform cork sandals lifting her five-foot-three, 90-pound frame several precarious but de rigueur inches above the cobblestone streets of the Latin Quarter, she stops at an open-air market, buys a crate of fresh cherries, and before the sun has set, proceeds to eat them all.

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My Cherry Amour

Seductress on the Seine

When I am first given this memory, I am seven years old and already being ruled by my stomach. In this instance, my stomach, a benevolent monarch, is immediately charmed. Clearly it is not the woman or the city but the cherries that capture my imagination and my appetite (the two are for me intertwined). Fresh cherries, after all, are the fruit that comes closest to its own Platonic ideal. To imagine a cherry is to see a cherry and vice versa. Or, maybe, it is the idea of having an entire crate of those glossy, rubicund droplets to myself that gives such urgent potency to the transferred memory. Then and there, amid the trailer homes, the Waffle Houses, the Piggly Wigglys with their shelves of fruit cocktail—two halves of a cartoon cherry deposited in each can— I make a vow to see Paris for myself.

At seven, I also make a vow to become a ballerina, to read every page of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* from A to Z, to ice-skate, and to meet the Bay City Rollers. I have fulfilled none of those promises. To Paris, however, I have kept my word.

I am an ardent, if not as frequent as I would like to be, visitor to the city. I have traveled there six times in my 40 years. The first visit, when I was 16, was three weeks long, and the most recent, to celebrate my 40th, was a fleeting “long” weekend. Paris is nonetheless the rare city that has witnessed me in my teens, twenties, thirties, and forties. I cannot say that about Saigon, the city of my birth, since I left there when I was six and did not return until I was 38, a long separation during which we both had to change our names. Ho Chi Minh City, née Saigon, meet Monique, née Thúy-Dung. We barely know each other now.

For me, Paris is the city of memory and of fiction, the site for invention and reinvention, and the home to a wish laid bare. I mean these hyperboles literally. I set my first novel in Paris, which allowed my imagination to reside there, albeit in the Paris of the 1920s and '30s, for five transporting years. Because our actual acquaintanceship spans many more years than that, I am inevitably someone new each time I find myself in Paris. Because I do not know how to read the street maps in my guidebooks, I am always lost when I am there, which in turn introduces me to a city that is perpetually elusive and tantalizing. But throughout the years, we recognize each other. And, if it is possible—and I believe it is—for a city to give you a knowing wink, then Paris does that to me each time.

Parisian winks come in different forms, but they all share a delightful feature. They are accompanied by a pleasing new taste, which acts as a mnemonic device, keeping the memory vivid, more like a *tableau vivant* than a photograph. When I am 16, the wink is a tutelage on the definition of the verb “to linger,” along with the sweet-tart I-am-lost-in-a-fairy-tale flavor of the *fraises des bois*, a fruit I had only read about in books.

This is my second memory of Paris, and it is my own. The year is 1984, and I am 16 years old. It is July, which means the city is bubbling over with tourists. I am sitting at the edge of the Fontaine Igor Stravinsky, a folly of mismatched water sculptures by the machine-haunted Jean Tinguely and the exuberant Niki de Saint Phalle. The fountain is a large rectangular pool that borders on the Église Saint-Merri, which is 16th-century Gothic and decidedly unfazed by the spectacles floating inside its new neighbor, among them what appear to be the remains of a film projector after a fire and a brightly painted reclining woman with water squirting from one of her sizable breasts. Already a week into my stay, I am an eager student and am practicing the lesson that Paris teaches me. The fountain, opened just the year before, attracts a youthful collage of tourists and Parisians who have eschewed the crowded, beachlike expanse in front of the Centre Georges Pompidou for the relative calm of dancing water and contemporary art that does not take itself too seriously. I sit among them and am slowly allowing my eyes to wander and spark and flirt and skip across the water's surface, from spectacle to spectacle, body to body, face to face. Here is the knowing part of the wink: As I people-watch, which is really one of the finest reasons to linger in Paris, people are watching me. I've come from Houston, where if you look up the definition of *invisible*, you will find a high-school photo of yours truly, and I am not used to the reciprocity. Honestly, I am drunk on it. At first I think that there is something on my face (crumbs from the sandwich I am pretending to eat?) or that an attractive woman must be sitting right behind me (should I turn around and look, too?). I am light-headed, a bit more so each time I realize that neither of these possibilities is in fact true. I need sugar, my stomach demands. I put away the sandwich and reach into my satchel for a small paper-wrapped package.

Inside is a cardboard boat, the kind that back in Houston would hold onion rings. Here is what I have spent my whole day's budget on: a small handful of *fraises des bois*. Not the prettiest of fruits, these blood-blister dots are so delicate that they morph immediately from ripe to bruised. They suggest more of a horticultural afterthought than an ideal. I pop one in my mouth and instantly it dissolves—a fruit, a candy, a kiss all in one—and forever I am 16 years old at the Fontaine Igor Stravinsky in Paris, experiencing a rare moment of bliss.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NOELLE HOEPPE

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