



IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

There are people who are compelled to leave the place where they were born and the culture in which they were raised and go to Paris, where they find themselves. Like I did.

BY HOLLY BRUBACH PHOTOGRAPH BY MEL CURTIS

I was 34 and lovelorn. Other people, under similar circumstances, turn to midnight snacks, old movies, psychoanalysis, tequila. I moved to Paris.

My hope, to the extent that I had one, was that the mere act of going through the motions in another city, in another language, would turn out to be such a project that it would distract me from my misery. Amazingly, this proved to be true. Every errand, however mundane, required a new vocabulary, words I had never come across in Molière or Baudelaire: *tournevis*, *crochet*, *marteau* for a trip to the hardware store; *tache*, *doublure*, before heading off to the dry cleaner.

But the truth is, Paris also took my mind off my troubles in ways that I hadn't foreseen. Everywhere I looked, there was something urging me to pay attention: a taste, a smell, some subtle flourish that a person trudging through life preoccupied with her own small problems might otherwise miss.

That summer, I sat in my first apartment, a seven-story walk-up half a block from the Seine, and listened through open windows to the chamber-music concerts across the street at the Musée de la Monnaie, with Mozart's ripe harmonies carried upward on the dense, warm air. Going on midnight, the noise of the traffic was interrupted by lurching, bleating oom-pah-pah renditions of popular standards as the Fanfare des Beaux-Arts, a marching band made up of students from the nearby school of architecture, snaked its way through the narrow streets, its gusto fueled by wine.

Shopping for groceries, I brought home *fraises des bois*, plump figs from Turkey, and yogurt made from goat's milk. At the bakery on the corner, I discovered *congolais*—haystacks of pure, intense coconut. In the Luxembourg Gardens, where I went to run, children sailed their boats in the fountain. When October arrived, I found myself trailing golf carts with a cargo of citrus trees in their *jardinières*, bound for the Orangerie, where they would sit out the winter; jouncing along the dirt paths, they waved their branches, like stiff arms, in valediction.

My middle-class, middle-American parents had instilled in me the values their parents had instilled in them: honesty, diligence, discipline, thrift, and a particularly Calvinist delight in the virtues of self-denial. All of which, with the sad exception of thrift, had taken root in my soul. We went to church. We played golf. We drank iced tea. The goal was to get ahead. Work was every upstanding person's reason for being, and pleasure and leisure were the rewards for a job well done. The only possible conclusion to be drawn from this austere outlook on human nature seemed to be that a self was not to be trusted, a self was to be constantly policed and kept in check.

An A student, a workaholic, a chronic dieter locked in a life-long battle against five extra pounds, I gradually loosened my iron grip, with the French as my example. I envied them their capacity for moderation, a skill that had always eluded me, and realized for the first time that pleasure makes moderation possible. I began building little treats into my day: a walk along a street I loved, to bask in the architecture; 20 minutes with a book in the Tuileries on the way to an appointment; a late-night glass of Champagne at a café; Poilâne's walnut bread for breakfast.

In my family, flowers were considered a reckless indulgence, unless they came from the garden or if it was Mother's Day. But in Paris, I met a man whose policy was that no vase should ever go empty. He took to showing up at my door on Friday afternoons, his arms full of roses—an astonishing array of varieties and colors, some with poetic names like *Cuisse de Nympe*, the pale pink-beige that evoked the unexposed skin of a maiden's thigh. On Saturday mornings, I awoke to the smell of roses before I opened my eyes.

Paris is surely the biggest, and to my mind the best, pleasure palace ever built. I've heard it said, by other Americans, that their idea of paradise would be Paris without the French. What this fantasy fails to take into account is that Paris *is* the French. If it's hard for us to grasp this, if we tend to view cities as stage sets animated by people who just happen to live there at the time, perhaps it's because no single city is the outward expression of our innermost convictions and the workings of our minds: not Washington, D.C., not New York, not Los Angeles, not Boston, Miami, Chicago, San Francisco. Paris is the product of a centuries-long collective endeavor—a society's accumulated wisdom on the subject of civilization, put into practice.

It was the French who alerted me to the fact that pleasure is both something to be discovered, there for the taking, and something to be cultivated through my own efforts. Its pursuit, as it turns out, is not a mindless slide into debauchery but a science, rigorous and exacting, discriminating between the merely good and the sublime. The thing about pleasure is that it immerses you in the moment. The present becomes more compelling than the future or the past. There is no better cure for heartache.

Had I been as happy in Paris as I recall? Thinking back on my life there, I have to remind myself that there were long weeks in February when the heat in my apartment was no match for the damp chill; that there were times when disappointment or failure or frustration dominated my thoughts, as it would have anywhere; that there were occasions when I felt as if I didn't belong. I have to remind myself because those aren't the things I remember. What I remember is walking home from a wonderful dinner at the apartment of some friends: It's two in the morning, my footsteps reverberate off the walls of the buildings that flank the winding Rue de Babylone. The moon is full, and except for the gendarme on the corner, the street is all mine.

I lived in Paris for six years and held on to my apartment for seven more, until the building was sold. I cried the day I left, not dignified, silent tears, but embarrassing, heaving sobs. The movers came for my furniture and put it into storage—an absurd extravagance, necessary at the time, since the only way I could bear to leave was by telling myself that someday I would again live in Paris. And I still believe that someday I will.

Just recently, a friend asked me how, having lived there, I could ever be happy living anywhere else. But that's not the lesson that I came away with. It's no exaggeration to say that Paris restored me to my senses. But it also gave me something more. Because in the course of learning to love the city and its inhabitants, I learned to savor the texture of my everyday life, not only there but anywhere. ■