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The Season De l'Amour

By Monique Truong

In the summer of 1984, I fell in love. I was 16 years old, but the object of my affection was no boy, fickle, impermanent, undeserving of my sleepless nights. That July I broke my heart and gave both halves to the city of Paris. I wish I could claim that I was a precocious old soul who understood even then that a city was a worthy beau and not a mere substitute for one, but that would be stretching the truth. I was a teenage girl, a growing mass of longing, and Paris was accommodating. That city took my awkward limbs and gave them the feeling of being at ease.

I had traveled to Paris on my own. My parents, for reasons not shared with me, had sent me there to stay with my aunt. I'm not sure they actually consulted my mother's younger sister about their decision, because when I arrived at her tiny apartment on the outskirts of Paris I found my aunt busy with a baby, a teenage son, and a flesh-and-blood lover. I was in the way for any one of these reasons. It also became immediately apparent that no one in that household was going to have the time or the inclination to show me around the City of Lights. For a brief moment, I wanted to get back on the plane and return home to Houston, where I could spend my days waiting, like a vampire, until the sun went down and it finally became cool enough to go outside.

What would a 16-year-old who didn't know how to drive do on summer nights in the Bayou City? Wait for a friend who could drive to come by, and then there would be hours of aimless driving, too much drinking or other forms of mild substance abuse, culminating in spasms of angst about how Life was going on somewhere, just not here. All this flashed before me, a looped series of images from the previous summer. Reasons enough, I then realized, for my parents to want to send me away.

That first night in the cramped front room of my aunt's apartment, the radio was on with the volume turned down (the baby was probably sleeping), but I could still hear the crispness that French words retained even when coated in a ballad. As I sipped Orangina for the first time and ate slice after slice of saucisson, a flavor combination of over-sugared citrus and salty pork that tasted amazingly good to me then (but that I would not now recommend), I came to my senses. It could have been the fizzy soda, the earthiness of the cured meat, or the whispered-in-your-ear intimacy of a song played low on the radio, but I felt like I was finally "somewhere." I lost all desire to go back to Houston, to ride in circles around a city that had no real center.

The next morning I got instructions from my cousin on how to take the train into the Gare St.-Lazare and a quick tutorial about the Métro and its attendant vocabulary of "terminus," "correspondance" and "carnet." My French was better than average, considering my public school education with teachers whose accents smacked of Lubbock and not Lyon, but still I was scared of having to use it. The solution, I told myself, was not to get lost. Mobility and self-sufficiency were already emerging as the dual themes of the summer.

The moment I left the apartment complex I got lost. After I stepped off the commuter train at the Gare St.-Lazare, I was lost again while still inside the train station. Leaving the Cité Métro station, I lost my way once more trying to find the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. The Île de la Cité is a small island, dominated by the towers and spire of the cathedral. What can I say? I did not have and still do not possess anything close to a sense of direction. My first few hours alone in Paris were marked by spatial confusion, which worsened my already stammering body language. My French, thankfully, was far less shaky. I, of course, had to ask for directions from two or three people before finally arriving at where I wanted to be. Fear and hesitation quickly gave way, though, to the pure pleasure of hearing the French language coming from my own mouth. By the time I reached the portals of Notre-Dame, my definition of self-sufficiency had already started to change from language withheld to language exchanged.

I spent the rest of the day at the cathedral. The interior, even though swarming with people, was dark and cool and had the spicy scent of something that I wanted to eat or rub onto my skin. I sat in the pews and watched the sunlight coming in

through the rose windows, the flags of the tour guides jutting up and down in the crowd, the faces carved in stone, and the postures of the devout kneeling around me. I remember eventually slipping my feet out of my sandals and letting them rest flat on the smooth stone floor.

After that my shoulders and arms did something that they had not done in years. The shoulders relaxed and the arms found the smooth glide of their sockets. Immigration from Vietnam to the United States and then puberty in the Lone Star State had taken away my body and replaced it with a fidgety, unrecognizable, all of a sudden alien one that was at odds with itself. I could claim that inside the cathedral I was practicing some quasi-exercise in meditation, but I didn't experience it as something so directed, so cerebral. I experienced those hours as a gradual easing into my own body, a feeling that for me at 16 was as rare as a summer breeze in Houston.

On my first full day in Paris I also climbed up the spiraling 387 steps of Notre-Dame's north tower and then the additional 125 steps to the top of the south tower. At that height, where the Seine was a snake and the bridges of Paris were its raised scales, I fell in love. I was gazing down at the Place du Parvis, which lay in front of the cathedral's main facade, and I saw a young man riding his bicycle round and round in a perfect wide figure eight. I now remember that spectacle, a bit pointless but elegant nonetheless in the way that he managed to avoid the tourists and in the way that they sidestepped him while still taking their snapshots, as a physical ode to summertime in Paris.

I can't exactly recall, though, why that moment had made such an impact on me then. Why did the sight of the bicyclist evoke in me a love for his city? As with all teenage love, it was probably something chemical. The late afternoon sunlight was angled just right. The bars of chocolate in my bag had softened and tasted like what they were, a mood-enhancing drug, after the dizzying climb. Or, maybe, Paris seen from such a height seemed knowable and promising, like a detailed map spread before a traveler. Even with no internal compass, I saw the city that day and saw in it a summer of possibilities.

Drawings (Drawings by Jeffrey Fisher)