

## Delight in Living

For my fiftieth birthday, I flew to Paris with my daughter, Meagan. Though this was eleven years ago, it feels like just last week, or yesterday. The last time I'd been in the City of Light had been with my husband, Pat, when I was five months pregnant with Meagan. When we took our girls trip, she was twenty-one, on the cusp of graduating from Savannah College of Art and Design and moving to New York City for a job with Ralph Lauren.

I had just finished breast cancer treatment and was standing upon the threshold of a new decade, alive with gratitude and uncertainty.

Both of us in transition, both of us asking: *Who am I becoming?*

Fast forward: Just weeks ago, while cleaning the attic, I found my Paris Box, a small cardboard relic holding maps, a dinner receipt, photos, and an empty container that once held macarons. It startled me how vividly these objects brought back memories—recalling this lovely side street, that gorgeous garden, and then remembering more. Details once deemed unforgettable had slipped away until my Paris Box summoned them back.

I was at a sidewalk café; watching the Eiffel Tower light up at night; bicycling in the walk lane while being yelled at in French; inhaling the lovely, warm, drifting aroma of a pâtisserie.

Meagan and I rented a small apartment overlooking the Tuileries Gardens, a masterpiece of symmetry and French formal landscaping. With its broad gravel allées and sculptured hedges, its rippling fountains flashed with sunlight as sculptures hid shyly behind groves of trees. We opened wide, tall windows to allow the urban symphony of Paris into the high-ceilinged apartment, or we stood on its tiny balcony made for two and talked about what the future might hold. The chairs and tables of the tiny café below seemed to beg us to indulge in yet another café au lait. We made no list of monuments to conquer, had no frantic itinerary. Instead, we wandered.

Each morning, I walked down the winding staircase to the café below and ordered a steaming brew.

I purchased a white fluffy meringue the size of my head and carried it in my purse all day, my own small, delicious luxury to nibble on whenever I pleased. We weren't after anything in particular. Just being in Paris was enough.

Immediately, we walked through winding cobblestone roads to visit the famed Shakespeare and Company: the green-and-gold bookstore in the shadow of Notre-Dame on the left bank. Bookstores are always one of the first places I haunt in almost any city, and this time was no different. No matter how far I've traveled from home, a bookstore brings a sense of familiarity with aura of paper, ink and stacks of books.

This particular gem of a bookstore feels like a sanctuary made not of religious relics but of books stacked so high and wide it's as if the books are keeping the walls standing. Outside on the sidewalk, a rolling crate tumbles with more volumes. Upstairs the rooms are small and closed with a sense of something secret waiting just for you.

As I made my way through the store, I thought about how stories have defined so much of my life, how they have been both sanctuary and solace. The continuity of the written word brings me solace, and the idea that the next book I find might touch my heart sustains a sense of adventure in my life.

Books build a kind of home for me, and I still carry my Shakespeare and Co. canvas bag and think of that bookstore and its cramped shelves. I also carry the idea that there are so many mysteries still to be revealed, not only in books but in my life.

Paris bustles, don't get me wrong. The city is alive and thrumming with energy, with history, and with ancient stories hidden beneath the cobbled streets and secret alleys.

One afternoon, a few days into our trip, my friend Sandee and sister-in-law Serena joined us. We bundled up and set off for a visit to Montmartre, the highest point in Paris and the historic square near the Basilica of the Sacré-Coeur. The market's canvas canopies viv-

idly flecked the square with bright colors as artists stood beneath, peddling their wares. On a cobblestone hill, some painted while others sketched, all while the Basilica's white travertine dome watched over us.

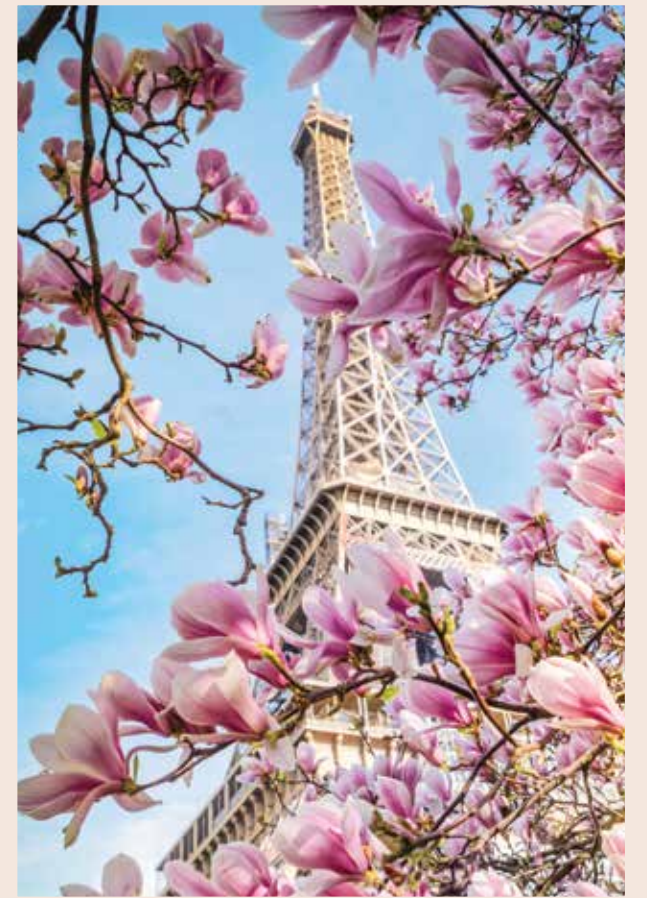
After much wandering and some finagling, each of us bought a 6x4-inch treasure from a debonair older *artiste* who charmed us, speaking broken English with his French accent. We debated the price, laughing through our shared language of gestures and raised eyebrows with a cold spring wind whipping our hair. We carried those paintings under our arms all day. Mine now sits in my office. I look at it some mornings and feel the whole afternoon again: the crisp air and wonder of being in Paris with my now-grown daughter.

On my actual birthday, we awoke early to make our way to the 850-year-old cathedral of Notre-Dame. I wandered through the hushed spaces thinking about how many souls had walked through those doors or knelt at the altar, carrying their own worries, stories, and prayers. Maybe someone like me had come here to mark the day of their birth with reverence, to honor life. I thought about the unseen orchestration of our lives, of how moments come together in ways that are much more than coincidence. I lit a candle for all of us, uttered a prayer not for a tangible and physical object but instead for recognition of the guidance available to us if only we slow down and pay attention to the moments we're living.

It feels easier in a place like Paris, and in the sacred space of Notre-Dame, to recognize and remember that we are part of something larger, a story that was written before we arrived and will keep being written after we're gone. This seemed a very fine way to spend the morning of my fiftieth birthday.

Later that same day, Serena and I, just the two of us, sat at a small table at Café de Flore from the afternoon until well past dusk, drinking rosé and recounting our lives together: the heartbreaks, the children we loved, and the miracle of finding each other in this crazy world. We sat like Parisians, side by side, facing the street. We drank coffee until our hands trembled. We talked with old men who visited daily, unhurried and content. It was a glorious evening as we walked over the Bridge of Sighs under a waning moon.

After that, the café became our anchor. Again and again, we returned as we fell into each long, languid day without plans. Even now, I have a paper place mat from the café framed and hanging on the wall in my home. It's both a piece of art and a reminder of a sacred day.



In not many seasons in life are we allowed to move slowly, with nothing to chase but delight: a perfect cup of coffee, macarons, meringue. In Rainer Maria Rilke's "Letter to a Young Poet," written in Paris, he says, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves." He also advises, "Live the questions now." Which is exactly what we were trying to do.

I don't need answers from Paris, and maybe I don't need answers at all, but to instead live these experiences with a heart attuned to the details that bring to the soul what the French call "joie de vivre"—delight in living.

When I teach about story, I say we are made of our memories of the past and our desires for the future. In Paris, those two forces met in the moment. The past: me once carrying Meagan in my belly. The future: she looking lovely strolling the avenues as a young woman.

Paris whispers its message to residents and visitors alike: Living well—slowly and intentionally, with presence—is an art. In my everyday life, I don't carry a large meringue around in my purse to nibble on all day (maybe I should), but I can be open and present to beauty and to moments of pure delight in living.

Joie de vivre—not just in Paris, but here, now, always. The best souvenir.