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Why Mavis Gallant, and Why I Went to Paris

Mavis Gallant, ou pourquoi je suis allée à Paris

Yara Zgheib, on 10 October 2022

*“You said ‘This is my old friend in Bucharest. Do you see a journey for her?’
‘Everyone travels,’ I told you. But I did look, and I did see a journey ...”*

*“You even saw the broken lightbulbs in the train,
and the unswept floors,” says Amalia, encouraging her.*

*“I know what Romanian trains have been like since the war.
Your friend came to Paris. What more did you want?”*

Mavis Gallant, “Questions and Answers”

Once upon a time, a young girl quit her job and left ... everything and went to Paris. She broke a lease in a very nice city and the heart of a quite nice boy (only briefly; he’s fine now); cleaned out both her fridge and bank account (there wasn’t much in either); put some clothes and the books she just couldn’t part with in a tan leather suitcase (found on a sidewalk; another story), and the cash in the left pocket of an old red coat. Then she went to Paris.

Why Paris.

When an interviewer once asked Mavis Gallant that question, she said: “Have you ever *been* to Paris?” But I hadn’t heard of Mavis Gallant then. It was 2012, I was twenty-three years old and when I was asked why the hell I was going to Paris, I babbled: I said I was going “to see the beautiful things”¹ that would give my life meaning. To find truth and beauty in the real world and write about it. To become a “completely non-utilitarian person... in a long skirt and big floppy hat,”² living for art. And ideally, from it. In Paris... I was going to Paris “to become a writer and live in Paris.” There. I’d said it.

1) Susan Sontag (1983), *Unguided Tour*.

2) Zadie Smith (2018), “Flaming June,” in *Feel Free*.



For the record, I'd always said it; that sentence exists, on record, in a pastel green, primary school handwriting notebook of the kind still in active circulation in a private Catholic establishment near Beirut. But we will get to Beirut in a moment. For the record, also, there were other notebooks, in which others wrote they wanted to become painters or prima ballerinas or go to the moon, or Bangkok, or become president so everybody would have plenty of food and no one would be cold. Then people grow up and most don't go to Paris, or the moon, or Bangkok.

Mavis Gallant did. She went to Paris in 1950 – she was twenty-eight – because “I wanted to live in Paris, I wanted to write fiction. And I wanted to live on it and in it.” She went having sold *one* short story (to *The New Yorker*, but still.) She had, as a journalist, seen and worked on the first death camp images released after World War II; worked with refugees and immigrants; visited orphanages and seen what happens in centers for young unmarried girls fallen pregnant. She knew the real world. She knew what it was like to be cold and scared and hungry, and knew she had a good life in which she was making a reasonable living, “for a girl.” She also knew the life she wanted.

“I just held my breath and jumped. I didn't even look to see if there was water in the pool.” Exactly. It wasn't a question. It was the biggest decision of my life – maybe the biggest mistake – but it wasn't a question. It was about getting on a plane. Gallant called it the “cost of living.” She says it better.

I went because there had to be a place, a real place in the world where beauty could exist, for no reason but itself, and people could live for it and on it – and love and fresh water – freely, and where people did. In “Malcolm and Bea,” Gallant writes about Pichipoi, “an unknown place. The Jews in Paris invented it. It was their destination, but it was a place that might not be any worse than the present. Some of them thought it might even be better, because no one had come back yet to say it was worse. They couldn't imagine it. It was half magic.”

It wasn't in Beirut, where I had grown up and fresh water was a luxury – water generally, and electricity, and bread sometimes, and gas for heating and petrol for car rides, and car rides uninterrupted by frisks and questioning at checkpoints, sometimes at gunpoint. Where truth was a fable and beauty was a summer without a bombing. It wasn't in Washington DC either, where I went first, instead of Paris, not to become a writer but something useful, real, utilitarian. Where truth was ... something completely different – perhaps I spoke the language wrong; English isn't my first – and beauty was the luxury – fresh water was abundant. Beauty hung in galleries and museums and on the walls of hotel bars and embassies. A backdrop to life. It wasn't living.



She had to invent something or perish from disappointment. She imagined a place where trees were enchanted, stones turned into frogs, frogs into princes. Later, she seemed to be inventing Bach and Mozart, then a host of people who lived with Bach and Mozart easily, so that she could keep good company in her mind. Sometimes I hear a dash of Lily's music over a radio and I wish I were still young – twenty-four would do – and could find Lily's inventions and watch her trying to live in them again. (Mavis Gallant, "Let it Pass")

And so I decided, at twenty-three, to go and live in Paris.

"Marie," Amalia would like to say, "will you admit that working and getting older and dying matter, and can't be countered by the first hyacinth of the year?" But Marie went on packing. Amalia consoled herself: Marie's mind had slipped. She was mad. (Mavis Gallant, "Questions and Answers")

I went to Paris and lived in Paris. The suitcase broke before I reached the check-in counter. In Paris, I wrote in a cupboard of a room I rented in a seventh-floor apartment, shared with four other people: one taught philosophy and didn't shower, on principle; one was, yes, a painter; one the muse; and one was trying to build and fly a drone from our roof. We were all poor and cold and hungry, living in that building with a spiraling staircase and no lift or semblance of heating, two streets away from Mavis Gallant. I still hadn't heard of her. Still didn't have the words to describe the immense, intense beauty, the freedom of that poor cold hungry scary life I had chosen. When I finally did read Mavis Gallant, she had died and I had left Paris and was as far away from it as I could be, in every way. I was afraid it had never existed. That I had made it up, and there was no such place.

Then I read Mavis.

The chinks of light in café mirrors; the people, *real* people, flawed and blundering like me, trying to make lives out of reading and sense out of life; reading poetry, for survival, and Astérix comics and reheating old croissants in the oven to make them "deliciously greasy and soft;" making wishes on full moons with second-class Métro tickets for lack of silver coins; practicing the piano without a piano; painting a sign for a Chinese fish-and-chips store, lacquered in black and painted "in red-and-gold characters, fat and thin... Finally, Jimmy Wing said: 'It's the most beautiful thing I ever saw.'" (Mavis Gallant, "Wing's Chips")

It was everywhere, in every story; brutally true and excruciatingly beautiful. All her characters were going to Paris, even when they weren't. It wasn't about Paris! It was about going. Not *Why Paris*, but *Why*. Because there has to be a place ...

It wasn't a place, but a decision; in her life and on every page she wrote. A decision to go, and a *choice* of how to live and what to see. The beautiful things. Mavis Gallant went to Paris to write fiction. She wrote the truest words I have ever read:



Last autumn one serious thing happened to Marie – she was in trouble with the police. She says that at the Préfecture – the place every emigré is afraid of – they shut her in a room one whole day. Had she been working without a permit? Did she change her address without reporting it? Could her passport be a forgery? Marie only says, ‘A policeman was rude to me, and I told him never to do it again.’ Released in the evening, having been jeered at, sequestered, certainly insulted, she crossed the street and began to admire the flower market. She bought a bunch of ragged pink asters and spent the last money she had in her pocket (it seems that at the Préfecture she was made to pay a large fine) on coffee and cakes. (Mavis Gallant, “Questions and Answers”)

There: Why Paris: “You can see the fork pressing on the very last crumb, and the paper-lace napperon on the plate.” Gallant, of course, says it better, so I will just continue the excerpt:

Now she chooses to walk along the Seine, between the ugly evening traffic and the stone parapet above the quay. She is walking miles the wrong way. She crosses a bridge she likes the look of, then another, and sees a clock. It is half past six. From the left of the wooden footbridge that joins Île Saint-Louis and the Ile de la Cité, she looks back and falls in love with the sight of Notre Dame; the scanty autumn foliage beneath it is bright gold. Everything is gold but the sky, which is mauve, and contains a new moon. She has spent all her money, and cannot wish on the new moon without a coin in her hand. She stops a passerby by touching him on the arm. Stiff with outrage, he refuses to let her hold even a one-centime piece so that she can wish. She has to wish on the moon without a coin, holding a second-class Metro ticket instead – all that her pocket now contains. She turns the ticket over as if it were silver, and wishes for something with all her heart.



YARA ZGHEIB is a reader, writer, traveler, lover of art and jazz. She was born in Beirut and has pieces of her heart in Glasgow, Paris, London, and one particularly beautiful, one-road Tuscan village. She is the author of two novels: the critically acclaimed *The Girls at 17 Swann Street*, which was a Barnes and Noble Pick of the Year and named a Pick by *People*, and *No Land to Light On*, which was chosen by *The Washington Post*, *The L.A. Times*, and *Newsweek* as one of the top books of 2022. Her new novel *Why Paris*. (with a period) and an essay collection are forthcoming from Harper Via.

Zgheib was a Fulbright scholar and holds a PhD in International Affairs in Diplomacy. She writes poetry and musicals, and publishes a weekly essay on *The non-Utilitarian*. Her writing has appeared in *The Huffington Post*, *Glimmer Train*, *The Four Seasons Magazine*, *HOLIDAY*, *The European*, and elsewhere.

