

ANOTHER COUNTRY

Laundry was dirty, suitcases were wearing thin, and so was I. I had lost count of the miles I had traveled. I had been traveling a very long time. Life was in disarray, left accidentally on an airplane, misplaced along with old ticket stubs or maybe left back at home, which was no longer very easy to find. Somehow, in desperation, I had decided to take myself to Paris. It was the only thing I was sure of. I was going to take myself to Paris and rent a flat with a piano for two weeks. Maybe everyone knew that I was going to stay awhile, deep down. Deep down, I wasn't sure I was ever going home.

A taxi had spilled me, my luggage and guitar into a very small street in Paris. I packed us all into a tiny pre-war elevator but could barely get the door closed. Four flights up, a blond woman named Cecile handed me her keys. She was sleeping at a friend's place while letting her apartment to me and promised to come back to take me out for drinks. She was surprised I was young. "Only old women from America rent my apartment all by themselves," she told me. As the door closed behind her, I wondered what I would do with myself now. I hadn't woken up in the same city for two weeks in at least a year. I only knew one other person in Paris. Well, two, now that I had met Cecile.

Cecile did indeed come around to buy me a drink at the café downstairs. Cecile was a journalist who had put herself through school as a jazz singer. She knew every single Joni Mitchell lyric, and we laughed like children for hours in the street. Christian, the one other person I knew in Paris, whom I had really only met once through a friend, took me in, too. He lived just around the corner in an apartment above a very large Foie Gras sign. He would lean out the window and wave and shout my name whenever I came over. His salon was always full of people drinking white wine wanting to teach me swear words or feed me things I had never tasted. We kept a dictionary close by in case we found words or feelings we could not explain to each other. Mostly, though, I played Cecile's piano. I played slowly, at first, with a certainty that I had nothing to say. But I kept finding myself back there, plucking a melody, again and again, until the neighbors yelled at me. I couldn't stop. And I definitely wasn't going home.

I somehow managed to find another apartment with a piano. It was a studio, so the piano was right by the bed. The best sleep I have ever known was sleeping beside that piano. One morning, I woke up with my hands clutching that piano. Days were wonderful there, too. I wore the same clothes nearly every day. I would take a coffee in the street, say hello to the good people in the little wine store across from my door, walk the gardens, sit in the church up the street. St. Sulpice was dark and cool and beautiful. Its ceiling was as far away as the sky. I would sit for as long as I could watch the tourists look wordlessly around the church, wondering what they were looking for. Sometimes I would just sit quietly wondering what I was looking for. There was nearly always someone sleeping in the back pews with a piece of newspaper over their face. Once, a homeless woman came in with a bag of peaches. She didn't think anyone had seen her, and she huddled over in her chair and ate the peaches with the light in her hair and on her face. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Sunlight came through the rose windows at the church ceiling, and I would watch that light from the deepest place within me. I would light a candle, the kind you could buy for one euro, and then I would go home to work.

I guess sometimes you do have to go very far from home and get very lost to realize that life is all around you and shouting at you to take its many good things with you. I don't know if it was the church, the piano, the markets full of figs and fresh milk, the funny faces you make when you

are trying to explain yourself in a foreign language, or the things you cannot take for granted when you are far from home by yourself with just a few words in your pocket. I cannot explain what happened except to say there were never enough hours in a day to write, and there was always kindness close at hand. I wrote songs. I played piano. I wrote stories. I took pictures. One day I wrote so much that I convinced myself that I must be dying. Otherwise, how could I possibly write so much? How could there be so much inside to say? It was the happiest I have ever been.

When I did come home from Paris, I had the seeds of this record in my notebook. Over the course of the next year or so, I returned to Cecile's piano several times. Christian's brother Patrice helped me practice the lyrics to Mille Tendresses before debuting them at a small Paris show. He scolded me very sweetly while we sang and danced around the room. But there were other places now, other towns and many hands that helped me sing these songs and grow this record very gently. Like a postcard having taken the long way around from some place far away and deep inside, I send these songs to you and thank all the dear people who have helped us both on our way.

—*Tift Merritt*

**For more information, please contact Krista Williams or Carla Sacks at Sacks & Co.,
212.741.1000, or krista@sacksco.com and carla@sacksco.com.**