



PARIS STORIES

MAVIS GALLANT

SELECTED AND WITH AN
INTRODUCTION BY

MICHAEL ONDAATJE



NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

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MAVIS GALLANT was born in Montreal and worked as a journalist at *The Standard* before moving to Europe to devote herself to writing fiction. After traveling extensively she settled in Paris, where she still resides. She was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1951. *Paris Stories* is her thirteenth book to appear in this country.

MICHAEL ONDAATJE's novels are *Coming Through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient*, and *Anil's Ghost*. His books of poetry include *The Cinnamon Peeler* and *Handwriting*. His most recent book is *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*. He lives in Toronto, Canada.

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New York

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INTRODUCTION

A HANDFUL OF SMALL SHIPWRECKS

MAVIS GALLANT was born in Montreal in August of 1922. After a peripatetic childhood (she attended seventeen schools), she found a job with the National Film Board of Canada, and then at the *Montreal Standard* as a journalist. In 1944 she published her first stories, and six years later, determined to become a full-time writer, she moved to Paris, where she has lived ever since. Paris seems to be her home in every way, emotionally, spiritually, physically, although she is still very much a Canadian who is living abroad.

In the last fifty years her publications have included several collections of short stories, two novels, works of nonfiction such as *Paris Notebooks*, which covered the student uprisings of 1968, novellas, plays, and literary essays. Her stories and nonfiction have for years appeared regularly in *The New Yorker*. And she has won many distinguished literary awards. Still, at present in the United States, her work is not even in print, while her reputation and readership are smaller than she deserves, though among writers she is a shared and loved and daunting secret. I know two writers who have told me that the one writer they do *not* read when they are completing a book is Mavis Gallant. Nothing could be more intimidating. "The long career of Marguerite Yourcenar," Mavis Gallant once wrote, "stands among the litter of flashier reputations as testimony to . . . the purpose and meaning of a writer's life." One feels the remark is an apt description of Gallant's own accomplishment.

This new selection of stories, drawn from the many she has written, is just a hint of her remarkable literary talent. And *Paris*

Stories, as a title, is more suggestive than exact (though Gallant notes that it's appropriate if only because everything in this collection was written in Paris, either at her desk or in her kitchen). The stories, however, take place all over Europe: in France, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and other parts of the Continent. Many of her characters have roots in Canada, or come from Eastern Europe. Her Europe is a place of "shipwrecks"—a word that occurs more than once in the stories. All her characters are seemingly far from home. They belong, to be honest, nowhere. Most of them are permanent wanderers, though a nomadic fate was not part of their original intent. With no land to light on, they look back without nostalgia, and look forward with a frayed hope. So that even the epigraph, from *As You Like It*, that Gallant chose for her early novel *Green Water Green Sky*, seems painfully ironic: "Ay, now am I in Arden, the more fool I. When I was at home, I was in a better place, but travellers must be content."

"All immigration is based on misapprehension," Gallant has written, and she catches or witnesses her subjects in waiting rooms, halfway across bridges, overhead in balloons, in transit—her very titles signal incomplete and transient states. (Only her recurring comic character, Grippe, a writer who happens to be a slum landlord, harassed by neighbors, disturbed by the changing times, is where he wishes to be.) After a while this collection of souls begins to represent for the reader the true state of the world.

The characters who people Mavis Gallant's Europe are complex and various. The same is true of her protean prose. She is light years away from writers who claim a recognizably indelible style and constant landscape, although we as readers *do* become accustomed to her chameleon nature, her quick pace and her sudden swerves, so that we watch and listen carefully for any ground shift of humor or sadness. Her tenderness arrives unexpectedly, while her wit is sly, almost too quick. Comic possibilities are everywhere:

The Blum-Bloch-Weilers, heavy art collectors, produced statesmen, magistrates, anthropologists, and generals, and were on no account to be confused with the Blum-Weiler-

Blochs, their penniless and mystical cousins, who produced poets, librarians, and Benedictine monks.

“Speck’s Idea”

I had not even a nebulous idea of how children sprang to life. I merely knew two persons were required for a ritual I believed had to continue for nine months, and which I imagined in the nature of a long card game with mysterious rules.

“Varieties of Exile”

Gallant is brilliant at tilting a situation or a personality a few subliminal degrees in the mind of the reader so that he discovers himself located in a strange new place, seeing something from a more generous or more satirical position. The stories feel cubist in their angles and qualifications, although the narrator often gives the air of being attached, lazily, almost accidentally, like a burr to some character—an Italian servant perhaps, a tax consultant, an art dealer . . .

Just listing a few of Gallant’s characters reveals the range and diversity of her world—lost sons, émigrés, refugees from the nuclear family or the establishment, all trying to scramble back but with no weapons to do so. She catches the behavior of the out-of-place citizen, who carries a single-minded bundle of craft and belief. What she gives us, in fact, is an underground map of Europe in the twentieth century, and what feels like a set of dangerous unauthorized portraits. Even ghosts have their say in “From the Fifteenth District,” that sly story of complaint.

The world Gallant depicts is cosmopolitan, and she is a writer of seemingly endless voices and personae, but in these stories she is also regional in the best sense. She has a brilliant sense of place. She speaks, in an essay on Paris, of “a small, dim chapel of gentle ugliness.” The city for her constantly shifts and evolves and Gallant will offer a humorous archaeology of Paris that seems to draw together all aspects of it, as we see in this opening to “Speck’s Idea”:

Sandor Speck’s first art gallery in Paris was on the Right Bank, near the Church of St. Elisabeth, on a street too narrow for cars. When his block was wiped off the map to make

way for a five-story garage, Speck crossed the Seine to the shadow of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, where he set up shop in a picturesque slum protected by law from demolition. When this gallery was blown up by Basque separatists, who had mistaken it for a travel agency exploiting the beauty of their coast, he collected his insurance money and moved to the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

Most of the time though, Gallant's subject is the comic opera of character. She slips into and out of minds and moods so quickly that we often miss the technical craft of that journey. And she often looks into the deepest of motives without, it seems, getting up from her chair. But if we reread her, we see how before we know it she will have circled a person, captured a voice, revealed a whole manner of a life in the way a character avoids an issue or discusses a dress. She meets these characters in the zone between thought and possible action. "Forain" takes place in the mind of a character who seemingly stands in mid-gesture, never quite deciding or moving: to act upon what one would like to do is simply too difficult, the end of that corridor is too far away. The action of the story is that of a Parisian publisher of Eastern European émigré writers going to a funeral, thinking about the deceased, and leaving. But these twenty pages are filled with a crowded and complicated nexus of lives, tactfully and beautifully revealed—of writers and their partners and daughters, their agents and publishers—and the half-ambitious and basically exhausted careers of literary exiles in Europe.

There is always this fraught border between wishful behavior and minimal action. But even though the world Gallant portrays is in shadows, her stories move as quickly and clearly as a glance. They suggest a series of sketches that show every aspect of these incomplete lives. They are often surreally comic, sometimes full of pathos, sometimes vainglorious. We live within them and they show us what we never expected to see about ourselves.

"Writers, I suppose, are like children imagining," Mavis Gallant writes. And in a way what we have in her work is something of

a child's strange clarity towards this shadowy, complex world that she is witness to. She studies her characters' behavior with gall, curiosity, with the toughness of a child looking at and studying adults. What results is a wonderful truth and, at the same time, great self-revelation. Many stories suggest a mask or portrait of the artist, or a persona active in the world out there, somewhat the way a writer like Patricia Highsmith invented the amoral Ripley and allowed him action (deceit, bribery, murder, forgery, good restaurant behavior, casual sex), while she herself resided in her small house in Switzerland. This is how writers spin, this is how a self-portrait can be paradoxically achieved by self-effacement. Henry James could turn a *donnée* heard at the dinner table over in his hands and create the intricate choreography of *What Maisie Knew*. Gallant, one suspects, similarly sees and meets people and then invents what becomes a precise landscape of their world. There is no vanity or self-aggrandizement in her process and the portraits are always tough as well as generous. For instance her satire is sharp in "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street," and yet she will take us beyond that satire to feel compassion for a character we would never have believed could be sympathetic. The tenderness does not replace or override the earlier portrait, Peter is still pathetic, but now there is that one moment where something happened, where the man's awareness of human nature was suddenly profound.

In any case Gallant always surprises us, never bothering with the dramatically obvious. Thus in "Ice Wagon" the possible adultery by the wife is ignored, is *not* the point of that story. These are stories in which you sense a great freedom of creation, the next sentence can bring a complete shift of tone or content, while a quick aside can include whole lives—sometimes halfway through one person's thought you will get another's history. As a writer Gallant seems beholden to no one. And for such a serious writer, one who can be dark and misanthropic, it is remarkable to see how many of her stories are gently and continually funny, even abundant with farce.

In one of the more recent stories in this collection, "Scarves, Beads, Sandals," we see Gallant in her prime, the prose moving at a brisk trot, but somehow still relaxed, utterly casual. Stray

thoughts leap from paragraph to paragraph. Does Theo look like Max Ernst or Braque to his ex-wife's new husband, or is it Balthus? And this minor refrain continues to resurface in an off-hand way throughout the tale. The story also has that most remarkable of Gallant's qualities—which is the ability to slip or drop into the thought processes of minor characters, without any evident signaling of literary machinery. And there is also a rare narrative intimacy where the mind of the central female character, Mathilde, at times merges with (possibly) something close to the voice of the narrator *outside* the story. But one could equally be persuaded by a similar intimacy with the ex-husband's memories, or even the wandering thoughts of Henri Grippe in the story "In Plain Sight." Gallant's craft and empathy, with that skill in evoking subtle and obsessive voices, is always ahead of us. She has, after all, what she claims Yourcenar had, "a reflective alliance."

"I had a great, great fear that I was bent on doing something for which I have no ability, and that took years and years to get rid of . . . that I was dedicating my life to something I was not fit for," Gallant once told an interviewer. With some writers greatness emerges out of their very tentativeness, their own uncertainty about how they make stories, or if it is even possible to make them. It results perhaps in every word and line being tested for falseness or complacency. It results too in a kind of testing, self-critical humor that lies within the text. "I am uncertain about every line I write and I am uncertain until I get readers." With the arrival of that reader, the uncertainty about "an unsafe life" becomes a shared witnessing. This, for a very few writers, becomes the purpose and meaning of a writer's life. "Like every other form of art," Mavis Gallant has written, "literature is no more and nothing less than a matter of life and death."

—MICHAEL ONDAATJE