

PRADA

STELLA LUCIA WEARS  
SWEATER PRADA  
JEWELRY (THROUGHOUT)  
DAVID YURMAN  
FRAGRANCE PRADA OLFATORIES  
TAINTED LOVE

# Le CHARME DISCRET

photographs **Sebastian Faena** makeup **Tom Pecheux**

words **Toni Bentley**



# PARIS, THE LOVER

One writer's journey to the center of French eroticism and seduction

words **Toni Bentley**

Paris? Seduction? Ah! How many times I have been seduced by Paris, in Paris. Because of Paris. Just say the word and I want to lie down. And have these affairs of the flesh, the mind, the ear, the eye, the palate been doused in more than a soupçon of sadomasochism? Mais, bien sûr! If they were not, it would mark yet another betrayal to the originator of that unique brand of amorality so popularized, and yet, ironically, degraded, by the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon—an English woman's sanitized version of French sensuality. France, however, is the land that gave birth to the perverse sexual anarchy of the Marquis de Sade, Pauline Réage, Jean de Berg, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jean Genet, Georges Bataille, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, Pierre Louÿs, Gustave Flaubert, and of course, the great Colette, of whom Lincoln Kirstein said, "Proust, Proust . . . now it is Colette who really knew about S-E-X!"

My Parisian promiscuity has been a lifelong affair. At age 20, while dancing with the New York City Ballet at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées—site of numerous scandals including Josephine Baker's mostly naked Parisian 1925 debut in "La Revue nègre"—I fell so in love with the city that, as yet unaware of the perils of possessing one's beloved, I was determined to own a piece of it, however small. For a song I found the little rat hole 18th-century apartment of my dreams, signed the deed of sale, and celebrated by sleeping with my first Frenchman: the young, tall, slim, seriously mustached, Gauloises-smoking realtor who sold it to me.

While the sex was in fact a rather languid, soft-core event, the true seduction was waking in his messy little apartment to find he had already (making full use of his 3-foot-wide wrought-iron balcony) whipped up a divine breakfast of heavenly café au lait, fresh-squeezed orange juice, creamy eggs, and toasted lengths of yesterday's baguette dripping with sweet butter. It was a feast considerably more sinful than the previous night's gropings.

My second great seduction was the night, years later, when the curtain rose before my astonished eyes at The Crazy Horse Saloon. So ensued a years-long affair with all things Crazy—from the red-velvet salon to the fantastic music, the intimate stage that renders the exquisite dancers Amazons of perfection, and the black Lechner pancake makeup each one uses to paint a precise, 4-inch equilateral triangle on her Mound of Venus. Alain Bernardin, the founder, explained to me what only a Frenchman would know about the erotic. I had asked him if he had ever gone "too far" in a number. "No," he replied. "Eroticism is like a mountain," he explained, "you climb and climb, but you never see the summit."

The great Crazy Horse solo, "Lay laser lay," set to the growling blues song "Bensonhurst Blues," by Oscar Benton, contains potent illustrations of this edge-of-the-cliff eroticism. Displayed on a small, rotating, circular contraption, tilted perilously toward the audience, the gorgeous showgirl sports wild, wet hair, a fierce demeanor, and her nakedness is dressed in some leather strings lying across her perfect naked breasts—surprisingly brazen from the get-go. And yet there is an indication of constriction, rendering it simultaneously perverse. She wears a string thong and, of course, dangerously high, tightly laced heels.

As she rotates in defiantly suggestive yet elegant moves, she also "walks" in profile on successive pegs on the perimeter of her stage. Toward the end of the number, she rips off her thong and, bathed in a *Star Wars*-like shaft of swirling blue mist, she splits her legs open each time they face the back of the stage, flashing wide her pubic Modigliani triangle—but away from the audience, thus stunning them with suggestion while also frustrating. With this move, Bernardin slyly seduces the viewers into seeing, despite the distraction of the astonishing display, the unseen in their own minds, the undisputed arena of true turn-on—such wit, such tease, such outrageous restraint, this level of sexual sophistication. Anywhere else in the world the stripper would split her legs wide toward the audience, crushing imaginations with reality.

If the Crazy Horse has you leaving the theater hungry for more—a likely prospect—one can cross the Seine to the Latin Quarter. There, a tiny, little-known sex revue named Théâtre Chochotte has resided for decades, a lone anomaly on the Rue Saint-André-des-Arts, in the midst of chic, intellectual, bohemian St. Germain, a stone's throw from the Sorbonne, Taschen, and the historic restaurant Allard, now owned by Alain Ducasse. At the entrance you pay your 55 euros, get a wrist stamp—good for re-entry for 12 hours—and descend the narrow, winding staircase of the 18th-century stone building, and land straight onto the small, cozy "stage." Here, it is all brocade pillows, feathers, ropes, masks, tassels, gilt mirrors, a tufted chaise, a Persian carpet. You tiptoe around this Arabian Nights boudoir and sit in one of the chairs or shared couches set up in two rows—a maximum audience of perhaps 20. The numbers feature either one or two, even occasionally three, girls, all good-humored, all natural, all with a Gypsy Rose Lee gimmick. And yes, they strip, but not like at any strip joint you have seen before. Things really happen. Between the girls—and between the girls and the audience. Live complicity.

On one occasion at Chochotte I was enticed, willingly, onto the stage, by the beautiful "Maeva," and as we danced together, she started to remove my clothes. Thank goodness it was a night out in Paris and black bra, thong, stockings, and stilettos were in place and, frankly, there seemed no reason to stop her. Before I knew it, I was lying prone on the Persian carpet, head carefully placed on a soft blue pillow and, well, things went from there. Once our "dance" was over, Maeva gathered up my discarded dress and underwear and led me offstage to her dressing room, where I was applauded by all the other performers while I discreetly dressed again before returning to my excited date. All utterly illegal in America, this was just another night in Paris.

While this unexpected encounter was woman to woman, I continued in my long lingering concern, after the rather *comme ci, comme ça* realtor lover of my youth, that Frenchmen as lovers might be overrated. But there was, some years later, another chance to assess. This handsome, unassuming, yet deeply passionate, man became the greatest lover I had ever had. Thus it was confirmed to me that the French are indeed both the true masters and mistresses of seduction.







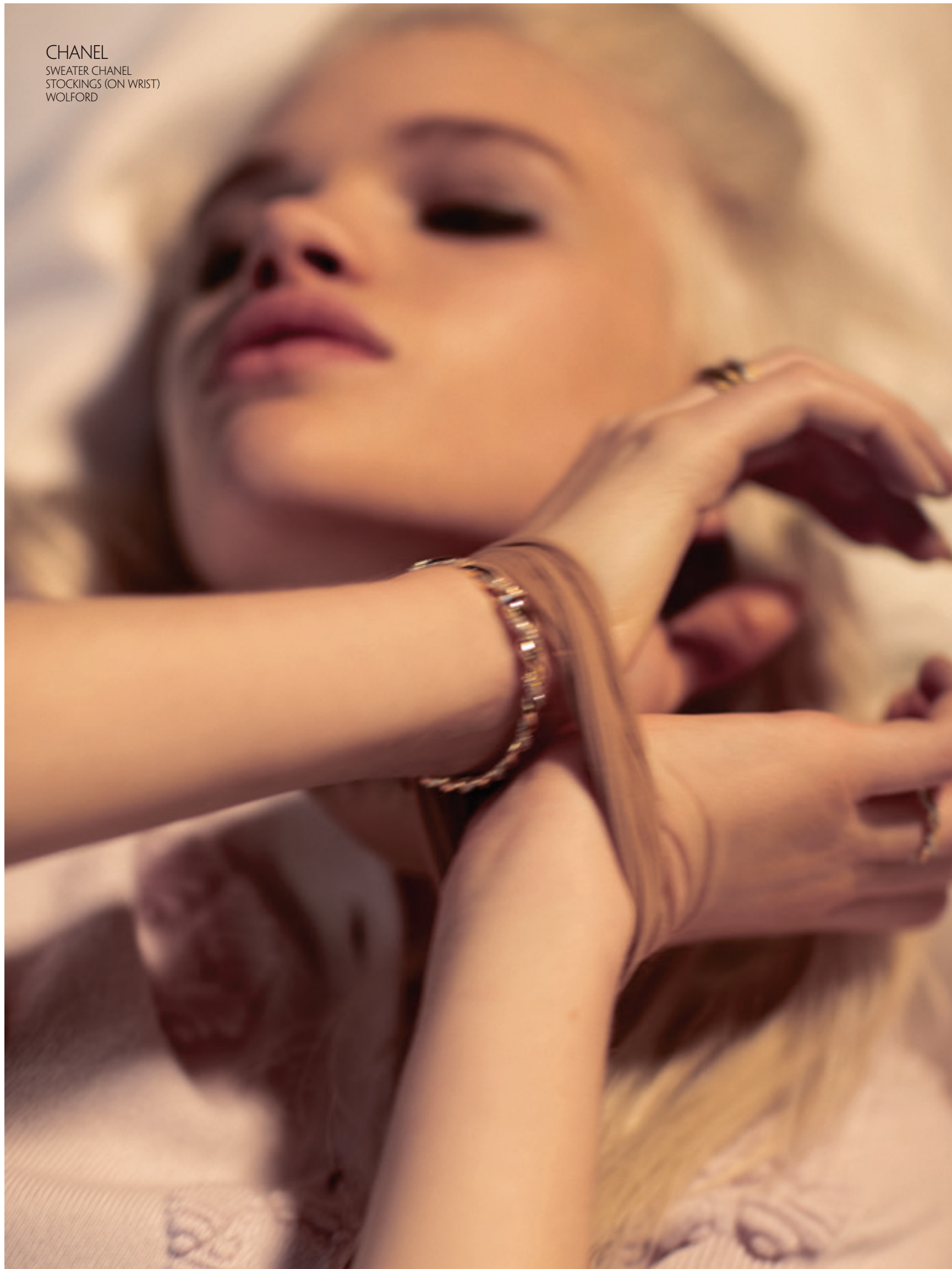
LOEWE

STELLA WEARS TOP LOEWE  
BRA AND UNDERWEAR  
FLEUR DU MAL  
GARTER (THROUGHOUT)  
ANGELA FRIEDMAN  
JORDAN BARRETT WEARS SHIRT  
SALVATORE FERRAGAMO  
JEANS (THROUGHOUT)  
J BRAND JEANS





CHANEL  
SWEATER CHANEL  
STOCKINGS (ON WRIST)  
WOLFORD







BALLY

JORDAN WEARS SHIRT BALLY  
STELLA WEARS SWEATER  
PROENZA SCHOULER





FENDI

STELLA WEARS DRESS FENDI  
JORDAN WEARS TOP TOM FORD









GIVENCHY BY  
RICCARDO TISCI

COAT GIVENCHY BY  
RICCARDO TISCI  
BRA FIFI CHACHNIL  
SHOES (THROUGHOUT)  
GIANVITO ROSSI







BALENCIAGA  
STELLA WEARS TOP  
AND SKIRT BALENCIAGA  
JORDAN WEARS  
COAT ERMENEGILDO ZEGNA  
SWEATER LOUIS VUITTON  
BELT (THROUGHOUT) STETSON







GUCCI

STELLA WEARS DRESS GUCCI  
UNDERWEAR FLEUR DU MAL  
STOCKINGS (THROUGHOUT) WOLFORD  
JORDAN WEARS SUIT BURBERRY  
SHIRT GIVENCHY BY RICCARDO TISCI  
SHOES STETSON







VETEMENTS  
STELLA WEARS DRESS VETEMENTS  
UNDERWEAR FLEUR DU MAL





MAX MARA  
COAT







PROENZA SCHOULER

SWEATER PROENZA SCHOULER

BRA FIFI CHACHNIL

BAG CHANEL

**THE FREEDOM TO  
CREATE, TO EXPERIMENT,  
TO PUSH THINGS  
FORWARD IS SOMETHING  
UNIQUELY PARISIAN AND  
SOMETHING WE FEEL A  
DEEP CONNECTION TO.**

— Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez, Proenza Schouler





MIU MIU

COAT MIU MIU  
BAG GIVENCHY  
BY RICCARDO TISCI  
ON NAILS GIVENCHY  
LE VERNIS IN SHADE 2  
BEIGE MOUSSELINE

MAKEUP TOM PECHEUX  
HAIR TINA OUTEN USING  
BUMBLE AND BUMBLE  
MANICURE MEI KAWAJIRI  
PRODUCTION HELENA MARTEL  
SEWARD AND MARCOS FECCHINO

