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A MEXICAN IN METROPOLIS: PENSÉES OF A SUMMER AMONG PARISIANS

CARLOS RODRIGUEZ



Aeroports Charles de Gaulle

How to get there from here. From San Rafael, take the airporter at the Transit Center. Get to SFO. And then take a plane to France. Fly into the night. Arrive the next day.

Saint Michel

In Paris I'm everything but Parisian: Algerian, Moroccan, French, Egyptian, North African, Arab, Indian, Asian, South Asian, Mexican, Spanish, Portuguese, South American. I'm everything but Mexican American.

At the university I'm scheduled to teach at, I ask for directions to the coordinator's office. The man at the information booth is Filipino; he is too happy to see me. He doesn't believe me when I answer that I am not Filipino. He says "but your look, your name." Not Parisian.

In the Latin Quarter, where bakers try to coax diners into their tiny eateries, someone greets me in Spanish – the only person in Paris to do so. My face must register surprise as he asks if he's mistaken me for a Spanish speaker. No. I assure him I do. I ask him how he knew. He replies flatly, "round face, you have round Mexican face." In front of my face, he draws a circle in the air. I'm not amused; my in-laws and partner laugh until tears flow from their eyes.

Not Parisian. Round Mexican face has given me away.

Châtelet Les Halles

In the center of a floundering, half-empty mall a man urinates into a planter between the escalators. I'm frozen with shock for a moment, left speechless. These are the first escalators I've seen in Paris proper.

Paris looks old yet smells like fresh urine.

Pere LaChaise

My friend Richard is visiting. We are searching for his grandfather. We set out through the narrow, cramped paths and wide boulevards of this city within a city. We are hopeful we will find him. We have a map, and people in these neighborhoods rarely move.

Instead, we stumble onto Jim Morrison. His gravestone is rather unimpressive, excepting for the guard on duty next to it.

Chaussée d'Antin – La Fayette

In the middle of the day, in the middle of a department store, and in the middle of Paris, a female store clerk reaches over a sale table and cups my mother-in-law's breasts. This French woman's hands, divining rods, bounce and weigh my mother-in-law's breasts. (American sizes are different than French.) I tell my partner, "Look, your mother's making friends."

She wanted some of the fashionable bras worn and intentionally displayed by local women. My father-in-law promises to buy her several. How does she figure out what size to buy? Her new friend, the Parisian lingerie clerk, reaches out and extends a hand. Two, actually.

I tell my partner I need new underwear.

Alma – Marceau

There's an old Mexican saying that I made up which goes "If you want to fill a house die old, if you want to fill a church die young." Or be famous and a princess.

There's a marker, a bronze flame, over the place where Princess Diana's car crashed in the underground freeway. The marker is odd because it is a tribute to something else, not Di dying.

A colleague of mine was staying in a nearby hotel and actually heard the crash – it had woken her up. Another good friend tried to kill himself that day. No connection to Diana's death, rather a feeling that he wasn't valued. He didn't succeed. My partner and I found him after he bandaged his own wrists. We rushed him to the hospital.

Rather than dwell on the obvious, I tell him he chose a bad day to try and die. Who would remember? Princess Di had stolen so much of the attention. He fakes a smile.

The doctor comes in and explains what will happen after the stitching. “You have so much to live for. Think of your son here.”

The doctor means me: I’m thirty-seven – my friend is forty two. I inform the doctor that it’s wiser to make the person attempting suicide feel better than worse. I guess I look younger crying.

It’s best to die near a famous landmark or existing memorial. But not on a day a global celebrity dies.

léna

From the look on his face and no work on my face, we realize we’re speaking Spanish but have nothing to say. I ask why he’s in Paris. “La situacion.” He asks me why I’m here. He’s an illegal immigrant with a Master’s degree but can’t find work. His wife works cleaning hotel rooms; he takes care of their daughter and the apartment.

I’m embarrassed to tell him that my university has sent me here. Paid to travel, paid for teaching, paid apartment, and paid for expenses.

Sometimes it’s best not to discuss work, even amongst men.

Pigalle

For every one Edith Piaf impersonator, there are several French illusions of the American feminine.

Of the nearly hundred women on stage at the Moulin Rouge (that’s two hundred exposed breasts), none looks real. The heavy makeup, fake breasts, and standardized height and size works against their humanness. They lip-synch to recorded music.

Queer thing when drag queens look more like real women than real women do.

Even the tit-a-lation nation fails. The sexiest “act” on stage is the male East European acrobats – bare-chested, muscular, and well-oiled – as their breasts display talent and strength.

Porte de Clignancourt

The longer you ride in the metro, the further you go out, the darker the faces become. As if the flicker of faces reflecting in the windows transforms skin color and you. Here the inner city is safer than the suburbs.

It pays not to look Parisian.

Hôtel de Ville

Cruella de Ville. Nutella and bananas.

Favorite villain of any Disney film – not that I went to Euro Disney – and favorite crepe.

Le Marias

At forty and in France, I'm strangely beautiful.

Objectified and exoticized, a man snaps a photo of me walking along the street. I apologize believing I have come between him and some historical building or famous facade. He snaps another photo of my face, closer this time than before.

I pity him.

No really. I'm not photogenic; he'd be lucky if I had my eyes open, mouth shut in the shot. And I think he must be losing his eyesight or his mind. The city is full of beautiful men (what's that line from *A Letter to Three Wives*: "the woods are full of girls"?). I'm not. Being modest, I know my market. Rather average looking in Western world, yet in the Middle East, I'm Brad Pitt. Arabic and Persian men have made passes at me all my life. At great risk I should point out. Literally, the forbidden fruit.

The photographer was not Arabic. He has a photograph of me and his life without much risk.

I should have chased him. If for nothing else than to give him a story to tell when he returns home.

Temple

I am a big man in Paris. Standing outside a gay bar in the Marais, the two gym-built men next to me are uncomfortably petite; it must rattle them to work so hard and still be rail thin.

I do little but jog. I could crush them with a hug. There's one bear bar in Paris (a bar for large, heavy, and hairy men and their admirers). I count three men inside who could all stand to lose five pounds. Even the bears in Paris are small.

Power is intoxicating, or maybe, the large warm beers are intoxicating. In either case, I show no fear of other men while walking around.

Short people love Paris.

Trocadero

Our metro stops blocks from where we are staying.

A place to dance at in San Francisco back in the day.