

***THREE'S A CROWD* by DAVID BENJAMIN**

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My paparazzo moment

by David Benjamin

PARIS — First night back in Paris. Fighting jet lag. Hotlips and I on a post-prandial evening stroll among the familiar narrow lanes of the Rive Gauche. We pass a corner where once we faithfully visited a little bistro called L'Échaudé St. Germain, which served the best dessert of our lives, a hot apple tart on a paper thin crust slathered with *crème fraîche*.

But the charming old couple who ran the place retired, sold it to morons who didn't bother to include the apple tart recipe in the purchase price, didn't appreciate that the whole restaurant — its magic formula — was one perfect dessert. The morons folded in less than a year. Now it's a cosmetics store.

But down the rue de l'Échaudé last night, a crowd. Flooded with light from a display window. Holding drinks, judging one another's threads. We couldn't resist. In Paris, always check out an unexpected crowd. Gotta be *something* goin' on.

Sure enough. Right inside there, other side of the display window, a cluster of still-photo cameras on tripods, videocams on the shoulders of burly cameramen, hot girl in a little black dress wielding a microphone expertly. On the walls, overshadowed by the hubbub, photographs of nude women. Or just one woman? The images crisp, well-shot, well-lit, vivid colors, but routine. Seen one nude...

"No, no, no, *m'sieur!* No photo! No!"

I had barely raised my Pentax for a few quick shots of the wonderfully Parisian *melée* in the gallery when the woman pounced with her "No, no, no!" I said, "Huh?" Made no sense. They're taking photos inside. I'm outside, peering through the display window, at the display, which consisted mostly of people with cameras, taking pictures. I like shooting photos of people shooting photos.

"No, no, no! No photos!" The woman was reinforced, then replaced by a man — well, a boy — 20-something, speaking English, telling me it's not allowed. "Not allowed? I'm taking pictures. In there, they were taking pictures before I got here. Tell *them* it's not allowed, Frenchboy."

“No, no, no! This is private! No photos! Not allowed. No, no, *no!*”

“Private? I’m on the sidewalk. This is the street. That’s a gallery. There are galleries all up and down this street. Look around. Galleries have windows so people can see inside, and even take pictures. It’s allowed, junior. I took pictures back there. See? Another gallery. And over there...”

“No, no, no! This is private. You’re not allowed.”

“Well, son, it might be private in there.” I indicated the gallery interior. “But this is the street. *La rue!* Dig? This is France out here. It’s not private out here. It’s public. I’m allowed to take pictures out here. Let’s call a cop. Let’s ask.”

“No, no, no, you can’t. This is private, here, right here.”

“No, this is public here, right here. It’s the street, Andy. It’s France.”

“Oh, yes, well, that’s the way we French are. Heh heh.” The kid was trying what? Diplomacy? “We don’t like. We don’t allow. It’s French, you know?”

“No, that’s not French! The French had a Revolution, to make people free. To make this street — here — free. To end privilege. To enshrine the common man with his common camera. Does *‘Liberté, égalité, fraternité!’* ring a bell, sonny?”

“No, no, no! You’re not allowed. This is private.”

I gave up. The photo wasn’t worth the *agita*. The stylish crowd was growing restive. I feared a Fausto Santini bag upside my head, maybe a Vuitton heel through my eardrum. I backed off, took a consolation photo from the end of the block. We further soothed our pique with a glass of champagne by the Seine.

Returning next day, I couldn’t find a gallery hung with overlit naked photos. I checked the consolation image on my Pentax. Ah, there! Galerie Catherine & André Hug. Two people cleaning up. I go in. Spotless and airy, a white, congenial space, but empty. I say, “*M’sieur* Hug?” I pronounce it “Oog.” Close enough, because he turns, speaks English. I ask, what happened here last night.

M. Hug, a look of artistic disdain. Last night was no exhibition. “Some young starlet,” he says. Apparently, the starlet had posed for a calendar, apparently nude. I tell M. Hug that the starlet’s posse gave me the bum’s rush, in haste distinctly unFrench. M. Hug shrugs in reply, as if to say, “Celebrities. What can you expect?”

I hope they paid you well, I say. “No.” Another Hug shrug.

Who was the starlet? “Her name is Clara,” says M. Hug, “Morgane.”

Amazing, but I know the name, vaguely. Later, I look her up. No “*young* starlet.” An old one, wrinkling fast. Started out in porn flicks, famous for fellatio, made Pet of the Month in ’02, just before *Penthouse* filed for bankruptcy, morphed into a TV hostess on those crushingly dull French talk shows where celebrities do group therapy for hours and not-famous people periodically burst into tears. (How can anyone watch this crap?) Now, Clara, evidently, is grudgingly evolving into

one of France's many sex matrons, overexposed on TV, too old for top billing, still young enough to occasionally drop her blouse and jiggle her way into the tabloids.

I realized what had happened. I had stumbled, in pristine ignorance, into a sad effort by a superannuated sex goddess to re-animate her mojo. She had surrounded herself with acolytes on hair-trigger alert to shoo away the invading hordes of rabid paparazzi. Who used to come, but now they have other celebrities to hassle, bigger egos to stroke, real starlets with dewy young breasts.

Which left, to shoo away, just me. A passing hayseed from Wisconsin who knew more of Clara Bow than Clara Morgane.

Me. The Lone Pararazzo. With Hotlips as Tonto?
If Frenchboy had been a French grownup, he would've understood. He would have cared — smiled, shrugged, given us champagne and kept us around. So Clara could drop her blouse and thank us for remembering.