

Directions or Pick Up in Paris?

On a 4-day stay in Paris, in July, 2010, I was prepared for a little adventure; not the French << *aventure* >> but just a little happening out of the ordinary; I am always on the lookout for something or someone interesting beyond simple sightseeing as I walk strange streets.

By chance one time a man in a simple monk's habit was putting out rubbish from a gated courtyard. We got chatting and he told me he worked in the Lazerite institution within; I was invited to have a look at the garden. It's not often you get a chance in Paris to get inside gardens and courtyards protected behind huge locked gates. This garden was about a quarter of an acre (massive for Paris!) with trees, bedded plants, bushes, and lawns all overlooked by many windows. It was a charitable organisation for the unfortunate.

Quite often as I walk Paris I am asked for directions, and incredibly I am sometimes able to give them. I've wondered about why people would ask me, a foreigner, and have concluded I don't look like a tourist – no camera, no bag, no guidebook, none of the obvious tourist accoutrements, and I dress casually for a day as a “flâneur” or stroller in Paris.

I'm not keen on too much of a surprise. I'm watchful, just in case someone's a bit dodgy; at the same time I try to remain as open as possible to the genial approaches of strangers, ready to help them if needs be.

To my tale! I was walking in Montparnasse on the Left Bank, near the southern entrance of the Jardin de Luxembourg and heading towards these famous gardens. A small car drew up alongside me on the left side of a quiet street. It was a new economy 2-door Citroen. The driver let down his window. He was holding a map and he asked for directions. He was in his mid-fifties, face slightly pudgy, dark hair carefully groomed; he wore an expensive grey sweater, a scarf at his neck. He was Italian and wanted me to show him how to get to somewhere on the map. As always, I was chuffed to be asked for directions.

“You speak Italian?”

“Sorry, no, please speak English, I'll do my best, I know Paris a little ...”

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I was disconcerted when he said he needed help to get to somewhere beyond the Champs Elysees, west towards the Bois de Boulogne, quite a way off, over seven or eight kilometres. Not that it was the distance that bothered me but the fact that he hadn't asked for something nearer to hand, which I could simply give directions to and get back to "flânering" about Montparnasse.

He told me that he had rented a car, and there was not much petrol left, no credit card because the bank machine had "eaten" his card ... what to do? I suggested that under these straitened circumstances he needed to ask for help perhaps from a friendly gendarme or just go to a police station nearby. I was just a tourist with a little knowledge of Paris, the wrong person to deal with serious matters of fouled up personal affairs in a foreign country. Oh, no! He didn't want to bother any authorities. Fleetingly I thought ill of him, that he was expecting me to give him money or deal with his stress; this thinking was not borne out by his smooth demeanour and elegant dress.

I wondered if I had missed something. Was all his palaver a code for let's go to the Bois de Boulogne (a popular hangout with prostitutes working out of vans) for some unbridled, cramped, backseat pleasuring in a hire car that had run out of petrol? I knew certain areas of Paris well but I was untutored in the ways of well-dressed older men in cars wanting something more than directions; I had just wanted to show my knowledge in a helpful way then get about my walking business.

"Come round other side of car and I show you something ..."

He was quite insistent. I went round to the passenger side and mindful of not wanting this little event to turn into an << *aventure* >>, I left the big double door wide open and sat in sideways, my feet firmly on the pavement.

He gave me his card, lovely and golden with black letters, "Milano" the company name on it. He was going to a fashion show and had got lost ...

"I'm a designer ... here my album, my daughter, she a model. Look! Look! ... I do all this, my work. You help me. Look! I give you clothes."

He turned to the back seat and grabbed a bag from a heap of glossy white ones containing new designer stuff like leather jackets, very swish.

"These are special, you look good, nice clothes ..."

Hah! It crossed my mind he'd chosen me because of my appearance, my lack of fashion sense. I needed dressing up. There was a feeling, though, of a travelling salesman making a pitch. Still, I thought quite a cock-and-bull story, making a silly mental note to check if that's << *coq-et-taureau* >> *histoire* in French.

Explaining I was walking the streets, carrying nothing, didn't want to start now, I made a movement to get up out of the seat, then I turned back and ...