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Other places, other selves

Stupid Gringo

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Stupid Gringo

Louis De Bernières

- 1 Jean-Louis Langevin strolled away from the Gold Museum, and reflected that Bogota was not quite as he had been led to expect. Someone in the office back home in Paris had said 'They call it the city of eternal spring,' and so Jean-Louis had arrived in the expectation that cherry trees would be in blossom, daffodils would be nodding in the parks, and beautiful tropical girls would be out and about in partial states of undress. He sniffed the moist air, with its bouquet of carbon monoxide and gasoline, and was reminded that much of any spring actually consists of gentle and persistent drizzle. At any rate, this was apparently the main ingredient of the allegedly eternal spring of Santa Fé de Bogota. It had been raining in a desultory fashion for three days, ever since he had arrived, and the beautiful tropical girls were effectively concealed beneath woolly sweaters, raincoats, and bright red umbrellas.
- 2 After three days he already felt like an old hand in South America, and laughed to recollect the wave of trepidation that had swept over him when his boss had come into the office one morning and announced that he was sending him to Bogota, with the idea that an office should be set up there, in order to market soft-ware packages all over the continent. Ideally, said the boss, such an office should be in a place like Rio de Janeiro, but the Brazilian currency had become exceptionally strong, making it too expensive to set up there, and Bogota was a fine cosmopolitan city with regular flights to every capital in Latin-America.
- 3 'But I don't speak Spanish,' said Jean-Louis, hoping to be excused from this particular mission, 'and I'm sure the Colombians don't speak French.' 'They all speak English', said the boss, scrutinising him in an intimidatory manner, letting it be obvious that he had taken note of Jean-Louis' lack of enthusiasm. Jean-Louis began to blush. He certainly did not want to give the boss the impression that he was a laggard, or even a coward, but nonetheless some instinct of self-preservation made him say 'My English is very poor, as well, unfortunately. All I can say is 'Where is the toilet?', 'How do you do?', and 'I love you.'
- 4 The boss laughed: 'The English only ever say 'I love you' to their dogs. To each other they only say 'Shall we have tea?' The boss clasped an imaginary Englishwoman in his

arms and gave her a cartoon kiss 'O cherie,' he exclaimed, 'Let's go to bed and have tea.' The boss turned to Jean-Louis and said 'How the English have children, only the Good Lord knows.'

- 5 'It's virgin birth,' replied Jean-Louis. 'Perhaps it's more common as a miracle than one might suppose.'
- 6 'Anyway,' said the boss, 'they say that an Englishwoman can be tremendous as long as she's drunk. I was told this by a Greek. Englishmen are all homosexuals, of course.'
- 7 'Ah, Greeks,' repeated Jean-Louis, his mind drifting away to the terrible things he had heard about Colombia. What about that story that the police were exterminating the children who lived in the sewers? Jean-Louis seemed to remember that this had turned out to be a canard, a clever trick whereby an enterprising Colombian had screwed millions out of sentimental European charities. Well, what about all these political assassinations, and the kidnappings, and the violence of the cocaine mafia? He shuddered, and heard his boss saying 'When you get there, you are authorised to hire an interpreter.'
- 8 Jean-Louis suffered terribly in the three weeks before he went to Bogota. Everybody seemed to know a Colombian horror story. 'I hope you've made a will,' they would say, or 'I hope you're taking kungfu lessons,' or 'I think that you ought to confess and take the last rites before you go. Just in case.'
- 9 Everyone had some helpful advice, too: 'Don't walk in the backstreets even in daylight. If you hire a car, watch out for the people with guns who rob you whilst you're waiting at the traffic lights. If you travel out into the mountains, watch out for the bandits who hold you up at roadblocks. If someone approaches you in the street and talks to you, watch out for his accomplice who is behind you, picking your pockets. Don't go out wearing a watch, and don't take your wallet. Put your credit cards in your shirt pocket, and if you carry cash, roll it up and put it in your socks. Don't wear your wedding ring, but keep a couple of dollars on you so that muggers will be satisfied and leave you alone. If you don't give them anything, sometimes they stab you or shoot you out of pique, and they like dollars more than francs or pounds or pesos. And if you get stabbed or shot, you should refuse to have a blood transfusion because you might get aids or hepatitis, so it's best to take a couple of litres of your own blood with you, and make sure that you also have your own hypodermic needles, because they tend to re-use old ones. And if you go to Barranquilla, watch out, because they've got the most virulent syphilis in the world. Oh, and another thing, 'I love you' is 'te quiero', and they don't lisp on the 'c' sounds, as the Spanish do. So when you're in a bar you don't ask for a 'thervetha' you ask for a 'cerveza', O.K?'
- 10 Beneath this barrage of information, much of it delivered with overt smirks of schadenfreude, Jean-Louis began to feel like a condemned man, or like a workbench that has become dented from so many frequent blows of a hammer. He fell into a kind of agitated sadness, developed a valedictory attitude to the world, and allowed waves of nostalgia to wash over him. He remembered childhood holidays at the campsite at Luc-Sur-Mer. He remembered a Belgian girlfriend who had accompanied him on an expedition to Saumur, and an Englishman whose friendship he had lost, idiotically, after a quarrel about whether or not Bonaparte would have lost the Battle of Waterloo to the British, if the Prussians had not fortuitously turned up at a crucial moment.

- 11 Jean-Louis' wife noticed that he had become sad and wan, full of sighs and wistful glances, and so in the evenings she made him *paupiettes de veau*, and *alouettes sans têtes*, and *pieds de mouton à la mode de Barcelonnette*, in the knowledge that the blood draws up courage and optimism from the stomach.
- 12 Nothing could console him, however, on the evening of his last day in France. That afternoon he had heard scuffling and sniggering outside his office, and when he had gone out to investigate, he had found that his so-called friends and colleagues had taped a spoof obituary and a funeral wreath to his door. When he had returned to his computer terminal, and checked his E-mail for the last time, it had been full of mock tributes, such as one hears at a burial. That night Jean-Louis made love to his wife with tragical intensity, and lay afterwards with his head on her stomach, romantically listening to the gurgling of her insides, and feeling very much like a little boy in need of a mother's consolation.
- 13 But now, here in Bogota, he looked back at all that nonsense, and smiled. It was true that Bogota was actually somewhat cold and wet, and not in the least bit tropical, but every Colombian he had encountered had been charming, helpful, amiable, and rather shamefully cosmopolitan. Many of them spoke excellent French, in an accent that sounded strangely like Portuguese, and he had had several embarrassing conversations in which Bologna was compared to Seville, or in which Stockholm was compared to Venice. Jean-Louis had never been to most of the places in Europe about which Colombians seemed to be so enthusiastically knowledgeable, and on one occasion he had been forced to admit that he had not even seen the Pont Saint Pierre in Toulouse, or the monument to the Girondins in Bordeaux, and had never got round to seeing the version of the Mona Lisa that was hanging in the Louvre. Colombians seemed to be very fond of poetry, too, and he had had to bluff his way through discussions about Baudelaire and Prévert.
- 14 Yes, the Colombians were charming. He had not had to eat in his hotel even once, and had received more invitations to people's homes than he could possibly honour. The cuisine had surprised him; he had been told that he would be eating llamas and guinea pigs marinated in spices that burned holes in the oesophagus, but actually the cuisine was wholesome and even a bit bland. Chicken with rice seemed to be the ubiquitous favourite, and it did not even contain any garlic. Fried slices of banana were much better than one had any right to expect, and yucca had turned out to be delicious.
- 15 Jean-Louis felt relaxed in Bogota. His stomach was contented, the weather was like Paris at the beginning of April, and the bandits at the traffic lights were either cleaning carwindows, just as at home, or selling copies of *La Prensa*. Some of them appeared to be earning a living by selling the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, referred to familiarly as 'Gabo', so that at first Jean-Louis had thought that people must be unaccountably preoccupied with the actress who had just wanted to be alone.
- 16 It was true that his new Colombian friends kept warning him about the muggers - they had this strange gesture that meant 'Watch out for thieves', which consisted of pulling down one corner of the right eye with the forefinger - but it seemed to him that there was no sign of danger from anyone anywhere. The centre of the city was small enough to explore with the aid of a tourist map, and he had devoted happy hours to tourism that should have been spent exploring the possibilities for opening up an office for the marketing of software in Latin America.

- 17 Jean-Louis Langevin had been sensible, of course. He had put his credit cards in his shirt pocket, he had rolled up his cash and put it into his sock, where the notes chafed him somewhat as he walked, he had left his watch and wedding ring in the hotel safe, and he had put a couple of US dollars in his trouser pocket so that any mugger could be sent away moderately gratified. Nonetheless, he was beginning to think that all these precautions were somewhat otiose, and that all the warnings and horror stories were simply the exaggerations of the inexperienced. He strolled away from the Gold Museum and back towards his hotel, admiring the sharp peaks of the mountains, and savoring the shafts of golden sunlight that were beginning to slice their way through the dirty grey clouds. 'Ah, at last, eternal spring,' thought Jean-Louis.
- 18 When he heard the footsteps behind him, though, approaching at a rate that was faster than a normal everyday walking pace, it was as if somebody had pressed a little button inside him. It was a button that switched off the sunlight, the mountains, the rainbow above the cathedral, the happiness of a casual tourist with time to waste. It was a button labelled 'fear', and suddenly all of Jean-Louis' senses went on the alert. Intently he heard the virile tapping of metal-tipped leather soles on the paving slabs. He smelled the scent of arepas frying in corn oil on the corner of the street. He tasted wet air in his mouth. His eyes rolled in an attempt to see behind himself without turning his head, and he felt a trickle of sweat abruptly course down the centre of his back and disappear into the waistband of his trousers.
- 19 'Hey, gringo,' called a voice behind him, and he flinched. 'Walk fast and don't turn round,' he told himself, 'act confidently and as if you know where you're going.'
- 20 'Hey hey, gringo,' came the voice again, and he increased his pace. It might just be one of those importunate hopefuls who wants you to help him find a job in Europe. He had had to cope with one or two of them already.
- 21 'Gringo,' called the voice again, this time with a clearly discernible note of irritation, 'gringo gringo gringo'.
- 22 Wasn't 'gringo' an insulting sobriquet for a yank? 'If he just wants to insult me, then I won't stop,' thought Jean-Louis, who certainly bridled at the thought of being mistaken for an American. The man was not saying it in an insulting fashion, however. It sounded vaguely friendly, perhaps even ironic.
- 23 Jean-Louis finally could not prevent himself from glancing behind, and he caught the eye of a large man in his early thirties. He glimpsed a yellow shirt with thin red pinstripes, grey trousers which were a little too tight about the thighs, and brightly polished leather shoes with ornamental buckles. 'Colombians,' he thought, his anxiety causing his mind to operate at hazard, 'always have nicely polished shoes.' The man was dark, like a Corsican, and seemed to be well-muscled and fit. '*Merde merde merde*,' thought Jean-Louis, and he redoubled his pace.
- 24 '*Momentico, momentico*,' exclaimed his pursuer, '*espera. Mierda. Ay hombre, espera.*'
- 25 Jean-Louis's mind went blank, and he made no sense at all of these Castilian exclamations.
- 26 There are only two types of person in such an emergency, the fleers and the fighters. Jean-Louis spontaneously discovered that in his case the response was definitely flight. Reason skidded away like a car on ice, and he broke into a run. Some extraordinary inhibition prevented him from calling for help; he was actually embarrassed to yell '*Au secours*' in a Spanish-speaking country, and how can you yell 'help' in English, when you

are French, and French people naturally cannot pronounce an 'H' even when there is no crisis ?

- 27 *'Hijo de puta loca,'* he heard behind him as the man also broke into a run, *'Cabron. Gringoncho. Espera.'*
- 28 Jean-Louis ran, his feet blurring beneath him, and a copious cold sweat breaking out all over his head. He smelled his own rancid panic, and felt his eyes bulging painfully. Behind him he heard the steady and inexorable tapping of metal toecaps on stone, and the perspiration ran down into his eyes, blinding him. He wasn't sure, but it seemed to him that tears were coming from his eyes and mingling with the sweat. He wanted to pray, to call upon God or the Virgin, but all he could come up with, like a blasphemous litany, was *'salaud salaud salaud salaud.'*
- 29 Jean-Louis blundered on, cannoning off lamp-posts and astonished pedestrians, fending off stacks of cardboard boxes, overturning dustbins, whilst behind him the terrifying and implacable steel toecaps drew ever closer.
- 30 Jean-Louis felt a squeal emerging from his throat, like the sound of an injured pig, or a woman keening over a death, and realised quite suddenly that all his strength had gone. It was the altitude; no stranger can run for very long at three thousand metres, even when that stranger regularly plays tennis at home in Paris. He felt his legs turning to rubber, and his feet increase in weight until they seemed to be pulling his knees to the ground. Nausea overwhelmed him, and his heart leaped and thumped in his chest like a beast that has been confined and is bound on breaking the bars. *'I'm going to die,'* thought Jean-Louis, *'O God, I don't want to die.'* Expending a last desperate overdraft of strength, he turned right up a side-street, and ran straight into a dead end.
- 31 His hands spread out against the brick wall, Jean-Louis, blinded by tears and sweat, his lungs cramped and shredded, his legs shaking, decided officially that he was going to give up. He was not going to turn and run, and he was not going to turn and fight. He was going to turn around and allow himself to slide down the wall amongst the overflowing dustbins that suddenly seemed so inviting and enticing. To die and to sleep seemed to be much the same thing, and both seemed equally attractive. He was already sprawled amid the rubbish, weakly struggling to loosen his tie, when the man with the steel toecaps rounded the corner and stopped before him, panting a little, but not enough to prevent a radiant smile from creasing his face.
- 32 Jean-Louis looked up and saw an impressive row of white teeth, amid which there sparkled one that was made of gold. He saw sensual lips, dark brown eyes, an impressive and glossy black moustache, and a tawny skin that sprouted with thick and exuberant stubble. More thick hair sprouted from his chest where the top button of his yellow shirt was unfastened. He was not as big as Jean-Louis had first thought, but he had the stout and finely muscled forearms of a physically active man. Jean-Louis caught a fleeting impression of a chunky gold watch and several substantial gold rings.
- 33 The man reached down, and Jean-Louis whimpered and cowered, shielding his face with his arms. Mumbling in placatory desperation, he started to fumble hopelessly for the dollar bills in his trouser pocket, and thrust them towards the man with little nervous flicks of the wrist. *'Voila, voila,'* he gasped, and the man took them from him. He looked them over with mystified attention, shrugged, shook his head, and then leaned down and stuffed them perfunctorily back into Jean-Louis' shirt pocket, where they joined his credit cards.

- 34 The man reached into his own trouser pocket, pulled something out, and waved it in front of Jean-Louis' face. The latter cringed, fearing that it must be a weapon, perhaps a knife or a derringer. Again he crossed his arms in front of his face to protect it, still blinded by sweat and terror, and heard the man sigh with exasperation; 'Hijo 'e puta. Su dinero. Eh, gringo.'
- 35 In the midst of his fright, Jean-Louis became aware that the man was actually tickling him. He was brushing something lightly across the backs of his hands, and on the top of his head, mussing his hair. Whatever it was that he was being tickled with, it felt like crisp paper, and made a clean rustling noise like sycamore leaves on a dry autumn day. As his wits reassembled themselves, Jean-Louis began to realise that what the man was tickling him with, was a roll of banknotes.
- 36 He looked up incomprehendingly, and then, astonishingly, the man began to mime. He pointed down to his left foot, he raised it, he flexed the elastic around the top of his sock, he put the roll of banknotes into his sock, and then withdrew it again and dropped it on the ground. He mimed spotting it and picking it up, and then he mimed running, waving the roll in front of him.
- 37 All at once, understanding dawned upon Jean-Louis. His hand went down to his sock, and he felt the now empty place where his money had been concealed for safety. 'Mon argent?' he asked the man, and the man stuffed the money into Jean-Louis' shirt pocket, along with the dollar bills and the credit cards. 'Su dinero,' explained the man again, gesturing towards the wad where it lay in its new place of concealment.
- 38 New tears began to follow each other down Jean-Louis' face. He would never know whether this was from relief, or gratitude, or from bitter shame. The man reached into his own pocket and produced a tooled leather wallet. Out of it he pulled all his own money, the scribbled reminder notes, business cards, and credit cards. These he returned to his own trouser pocket, and then he reached into Jean-Louis' shirt and removed the latter's cards, cash, and token dollars. He tucked them into the empty wallet, and presented the wallet to Jean-Louis. 'Un regalito,' he said, his eyes twinkling, 'un resuerdo de Colombia. Con mis mejores deseos.'
- 39 Jean-Louis' confusion and horror were slowly beginning to subside, along with the insupportable thumping of blood behind his eyes and in his temples, and he took the wallet in his hands and gazed at it with childish wonder. He looked up at the man who had decided to give it to him so that he would not have to carry his cash insecurely in his socks, and he began to laugh, his shoulders heaving, and his breath coming in painful sobs. The Colombian was momentarily nonplussed, but then he smiled, leaned forward, and patted Jean-Louis on the cheek. It was a gesture both paternal and patronising, a gesture full of humour and sympathy and affection. He patted Jean-Louis' face again, and came up with the only appropriate English words he knew: 'Estupid gringo,' he said.