

Marilyn in Ottawa

by Steven Gowin

I walk the streets of Ottawa.

Clouds block the sun; it rains a bit but only a bit... a neither here nor there rain. It's July, but a cool enough day.

Ottawa people, Ottawans? head to work briskly, but not rushy. I'm on my way too. I'm a visitor, but I've work to do... business in Ottawa. And Ottawa as far as I can make out is a nice enough small city, the capitol city.

It has a Parliament, Victorian Gothic... did I make that up... and canals, and French across the river. No Chicago, or New York, or California Los Angeles, none of those, Canada Ottawa makes up in civility what it lacks in edge.

A woman, amongst a group of walkers, approaches. At first I notice nothing about her except that her summer skirt, a light skirt, floral... do they say "frock" in Canada... billows up above her waist as she walks over a grate, flies up almost to her eyes, the whole skirt an inverse parachute there in July in Ottawa in a drizzle, a light rain, really.

And the Marilyn instant overcomes me... the image from that movie in Manhattan, 52nd and Lex. That Marilyn photo is a good one, a good image, not because you see anything; you see nothing even by 50's standards, nothing. It's only the joy on Marilyn's face... her joy, her wonder... that damned clichéd innocence.

Well, you "get" Marilyn or you don't; you can agree or not. But when the Ottawa woman's skirt did blow up, I recognized that woman and understood that she was plain, a plain woman, a middle aged woman, neither beautiful nor repugnant, just an Ottawanaise, a mom, sister, wife, daughter, somebody bored with another day of work.

And I looked away as quickly as I could. I looked away. Why embarrass the Ottawa woman? Why make her uncomfortable? The polite thing is to move on, forget about it. Stare at the sidewalk not yet wet but becoming wet. Be Canadian.

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But I can't forget the instant I saw that woman, all under the clouds in the light rain, she not yet bewildered, not yet even embarrassed. And so the joylessness, the not Marilynness of it all overcomes me...

In my mind, I combine that dull picture, the commonplace, and the Ottawanaisie, with the fine Marilyn image. And the dull one thievs the joyous one, robs that wondrous Marilyn instant forever.

Thanks Ottawa... for nothing.

