

## It's tradition

Farrah Mateen

“Will you take lunch with us?” asked Dr. Hanslik, a native Montrealer working in the Paris hospital I was visiting. “You may find it rather shocking.”

But after a summer working at Institut Pasteur in Paris, there was not much left to shock me — some things in France are just a bit too public: nude beaches, nuns in taverns, 40-cm-high platform shoes, Pasteur’s crypt of gold surrounded by pictograms of rabid dogs in Byzantine mosaic, a lady falling headfirst down the central staircase of Galeries Lafayette while trying to buy a \$10 000 Fendi bag (they were on sale, I was told). I had seen it all. Almost.

“*Bien sûr, merci,*” I replied with a little bit of colloquial French, conjuring up images of puréed mystery dishes in the staff cafeteria in Saskatoon.

A nice lunch would be welcome. We were in the midst of the worst heat wave Paris had seen in more than a century. We had all been sweating for 8 days with no respite — neither wind nor air-conditioning were at our disposal. The hospital was no exception. *Il fait trop chaud.* Heat stroke, fainting. Seniors lined up to soak in wet sheets — the new standard of care. Even the doctors were dropping.

I joined a parade of white coats going to the building where lunch would be served. It seemed a bit run down, but I attributed this to the fact that it’s a public assistance hospital. There was graffiti on the walls. Poor them, I thought. It looked like the Metro vandals had worked their *West Side Story* on the place.

I walked in. The walls were covered by murals — well, sort of. All the figures were quite explicit. It looked like Ringling’s circus, except for the large paintings of genitalia.

“What do you think?”

“It’s very, well, uh, bright ... and ... phallic,” I responded, glancing at the dancing penises on the wall. Not exactly the *Mona Lisa*. “I hate to ask, but what was this building’s previous function? Night club? Shelter?”

“It’s an *internat*. These are done by local artists that the doctors get to come in. They change the art frequently in this style. It’s a French tradition.” [*Internats, found in most French public hospitals, are known for their scandalous, unrepressed décor and other unusual traits. — Ed.*]

Freud would have had himself a heyday here. I spied a sphinx wearing glasses and a business suit. “I don’t remember the sphinx having such large penises,” I added.

After being seated, I was distracted by someone touching me on the back. “Oh pardon,” I exclaimed as he passed, touching everyone on the back as he went by. That’s strange, I thought, but hey, there’s one in every group. I continued eating. But then it happened again when some-



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one else entered. And again. What’s going on?

This thought was interrupted by the intern next to me. He was wiping his mouth on the crisp white tablecloth. And not discreetly. Was this the same person who holds doors open for strangers? Oh well, I can just look away. Then others began wiping their lips on the tablecloth in wide sweeping gestures. The chief of staff, the department head. Where were their manners? Was this really happening in Paris, the city of sophistication? By now everyone was bobbing up and down to the tablecloth like rubber ducks in a bathtub. I looked to my right and saw a smear of *basquaise* sauce and mashed potatoes dangling off the tablecloth, precariously ready to land on the intern’s lap.

I was losing my appetite quickly, but dessert is never a problem. I took a chocolate yogourt, as only the French can make. I opened it up and reached for my spoon. There wasn’t one. I searched for the French word — *cui* — what? “*Est-ce qu’il y a un —*” But I stopped because I noticed everyone was using the handle of a fork as a spoon. The handle — the one that collects all the grease from sweaty hands. The one that touches the cuff of your lab coat when you use a fork properly. And they were all wearing their lab coats. *Faux pas* to take it off! Ugggh.

The doctor across the table traded in his round-handled fork for one with a flat handle. “*Pourquoi ?*” I asked.

“It’s tradition.”

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