Mr. and Mrs. Rodríguez

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When I learned that I would be spending a few days in Madrid, I asked my mother to meet me there so that we could spend some time together. She was living in Denia at the time, a charming town in Alicante right on the Mediterranean. I met her train, and we took a taxi to the hotel, a fine old establishment on the Gran Vía, in the heart of the city, that had seen better days but was still clean and comfortable. I had stayed there before. It was midsummer and the streets were pleasantly empty.

We approached the reception desk and the clerk looked at us and grinned. I asked for two adjoining rooms with a connecting door, as high up as possible and with a view of the city. He said he had just the thing and poised his pen over the huge ledger on his desk. "Will that be for Mr. and Mrs. Rodríguez?" he asked, the cheeky grin still on his face. I was bewildered for a moment but then understood what he was getting at. "No," I said curtly, and showed him my passport.

"What was that business about Rodríguez?" Muriel asked as we rode up in the lift. I waved my hand in the air and said I would explain later. We checked into our rooms and freshened up a little, then strolled down the street to a nearby tavern. After a couple of sips of our gin tonics, I told Muriel what the hotel receptionist had been talking about. Summer in Madrid is always hot, and before air-conditioning changed things, many families were separated during those weeks or months. The wives went to the coast or the mountains with the children while the husbands stayed in town to work and commuted to be with their families on the weekends. Over time, hotels noticed that on those warm nights in the half-empty city a surprising number of guests were called "Rodríguez," a surname that is as common in Spanish as Smith is in English. The guests, of course, were those hard-working husbands and their equally hard-working secretaries. This custom of summer trysting evidently became so commonplace that the concept entered the language in the form of the name that had graced so many hotel registers. To this day Madrileños will say *"Estoy de Rodríguez"* when their wives are out of town, meaning that they are "being a Rodríguez"—or "batching it" as they say in England—though it doesn't necessarily mean they are misbehaving. Muriel was tall and slim and still youthful, and though the receptionist had obviously misjudged us, his assumption hadn't been too much of a stretch based on his experience. She laughed and said, "I suppose I should feel flattered."

Later that night, over dinner at a restaurant near the Puerta del Sol, it occurred to Muriel that the Rodríguez situation I had described earlier was reminiscent of the American movie *The Seven Year Itch*. "It's basically the same story," she said. She was right. In the film, a New Yorker sends his wife and son off to the coast for the summer while his job keeps him in Manhattan. Marilyn Monroe moves into the apartment upstairs, and his fantasies and her reactions form the basis of the plot. This movie, a romantic comedy directed by Billy Wilder and released in 1955, was actually pretty naive considering the subject it was exploring; there was no impropriety, no infidelity, no scandal at all. But it did introduce one of the most recognizable pop culture images of the twentieth century. It happened in the scene where Monroe is standing on a subway grate on a New York street when a passing train causes a blast of air to blow her skirt up above her waist, exposing her legs for all the world to see.

We spent the next few days wandering around the city, visiting places I used to frequent when I lived there in the 1960s and catching up with a couple of old friends. With so many people on vacation, the pavements weren't crowded and there weren't many cars on the streets. It was easy to get a table at places that remained open. We played a game, identifying those we thought might be Rodríguez couples and making up stories about their relationships. Madrid is a beautiful city, and for that brief moment we felt we had it all to ourselves.