

## Back from Tanzania, 1981 (Part #1):

*From Jan. 1980 to the beginning of Sept. 1981, I taught English at a girls' secondary school in Kilimanjaro Region, Tanzania. In leaving 6 weeks before the end of the final term, I gave the excuse that I needed to return quickly to Canada to prepare for graduate school in Jan. 1982. Although I had no such prospects, I was unwilling to face my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in what seemed to be stagnating circumstances.*

*The following are excerpts from journal notes taken during the 3½-week journey back to Canada through South Asia, via neighbouring Kenya:*

**September 5** (*Danish Volunteer House, Nairobi, Kenya*)



The last bus for Nairobi had already departed and there was no possibility at the dusty border hamlet of Namanga to change money. Still, I had made it across and even had 50 Kenyan shillings, lent to me by a kindly Indian businessman in the Kenyan immigration line up. With the only option being to catch a lift, I walked uncertainly past a few *Maasai* traders squatting before mats of plastic kitchenware: precious commodities back in Tanzania.

Much more striking than the Kenyan flag at the border post— was the Shell sign in the filling station ahead that proclaimed the entry into ebulliently pro-Western territory.

At the gas pump was a black Mercedes with 3 Africans in natty suits standing around it. They were speaking in English:

"Now really don't you think that's unreasonable?" said one holding his wallet.

"Yes, but surely you must see *my* point?" said another with crossed arms.

I stopped up, a little stunned. Just a few meters inside the border could I already be seeing *wabenzi* —the Kenyan elites against whom Tanzanian righteousness so often rail? Still, they may be sympathetic to a *mzungu* needing a lift:

"*Naomba lifti?*" I asked in Kiswahili. *Shillingi arobaini?*"

Probably taken aback by the tattily dressed *mzungu* addressing them in Swahili, the 3 gentlemen at first ignored me. In English, they continued in what seemed to be a dispute over who owed for the beers at the border bar.

"*Naomba saidu?*" I persisted. More effective than the suppliant tone this time— were the Kenyan shilling notes I waved up.

Minutes later, I was seated in back seat of the Mercedes flying over the smooth road north to Nairobi. Meanwhile, introductions had established that the 3 Kenyans were returning from Arusha where they had attended a conference of brewery executives of Anglophone Africa. They seems at first uneasy with the *mzungu* in the backseat listening in on their conversation but gradually grew more cordial—especially Joseph, the younger of the 3 who sat beside me.

"We were shocked, honestly, by the empty shops," he said in his British accented English. "Do the Tanzanians have anything at all to buy these days?"

Even as I duly complied with anecdotes of chronic shortages and mismanagement from my 2 years of sojourning in the realm of *ujamaa* [Tanzania socialism], Joseph remarked:

"One thing I do admire about the Tanzanians is that they are trying to be self-sufficient."

"They talk a lot about *kujitegemea*, self-reliance, I countered. "But they realize that admit that their economy is crippled without foreign currency."

"Oh yes, one can't live without trade," he said stretching his well-creased pant leg, "And one can't eat politics."

As the Mercedes sped closer to Nairobi, the conversation turned from the deprivations of *ujamaa* receding behind us, to the arresting features of the landscape we were passing through. Joseph pointed out the green plantations amid the dry steppe, the cement factory at Atho River and the nightclubs at Machokos. In identifying a slaughterhouse complex, George, in the front seat said:

"Our beef is certified butchery's quality sirloin, New York steak and filet mignon. We export under the Libby's brand. "

When I asked about coffee exports, in which Tanzania was so desperately pinning hopes, George informed.

"Yes, we grow coffee in the highlands. But tea is a bigger export..." Adjusting his shades, he added, "I'm the tea farmer myself."

Soon we were cruising down a divided highway zipping under flyovers and passing a meteorological center before being slowed by the traffic emerging from Nairobi

International Airport complex. Then in the growing dusk— we drew nearer to what seemed a mirage of towers rising above the veld – downtown Nairobi.

So it was that with the succour of 3 cordial *wabenzi*— members of the elite Mercedes Benz tribe— I got to Nairobi before dark.



The Brewery executives drove out of their way to drop me at this Danish volunteer guesthouse that was recommended by my middle-aged Danish colleagues at Weru-Weru. I certainly would have preferred a cheap hotel room downtown, but being without Kenyan money (having paid the 40 shillings in advance for the lift) for the first night there was no choice.

Fortunately, the Kenyan caretaker was understanding when I explained why I was unable to pay in advance. He walked me into the dorm and pointed to a lower bunk (Just one night, I reassured myself). A redheaded young Dane emerging from the communal bathroom looked puzzled to see an older guy hunched back on the bunk.

In taking my turn in the bathroom, I lingered in amusement before the tourist poster of Denmark pinned above the sink. It featured a cartoon of a line of cars, with smiling passengers stopped before a mother duck, leading a line of ducklings across a road. So this is how Danes see themselves?

Back on my bunk I thought of my middle-aged Danish colleagues, Mr. and Mrs. Pramming. Upon their first arrival at the school, I had thought them cold— but though the year, it was Mr. Pramming's warmth and gentle humour I came to know him best for.

"Don't get lost," he said, in our final farewell at the Namanga border post where he'd kindly driven me. "It's a big world, you know!"

Mr. Pramming was one of those Danes who would definitely wait smiling no matter how long the ducklings took to cross the road!

I also thought of Bella K., the comely Haya commerce teacher, who accompanied us to on the drive to the border. Had she come primarily to see me off or for the opportunity to buy Kenyan soap and toothpaste?

In either case, when I gave her an awkward peck on the cheek in parting, she promised to write...

Then I thought of my last view of the students in their blue work shifts clustered on the *beachi* [the mowed expanse between the school and the fence] as Mr. Pramming's car exited the gate. If I send a forwarding address (when I get one)—how many of them will write?

In the meantime, a trio of Danish volunteers including one blonde female had entered the dorm and were unstrapping their backpacks. Too exhausted to be sociable, I turned to the wall, feigning sleep.

**September 6** (*Gloria Hotel, Tom Mboya St., Nairobi*)



Much to my relief, the foreign change kiosk in the New Stanley Hotel was open on a Sunday morning. Yet it was with more than just relief that I counted the fresh-smelling Kenyan shillings bills.

After 2 years of relying on practically worthless money, it felt strangely liberating to once again have access to a portion of “the sweets” of a consumer economy. Still, in having access to those ‘sweets’, I reminded myself, I was among a privileged few. I looked over out into the lobby where a middle aged couple in safari gear stood warily beside their stylish leather luggage. In walking out through the deep pile carpet of the lobby, the question became: was it better to be among the tantalized poor, as in Kenya, or the righteous poor, as in Tanzania?

Touching the money bulging in my neck pouch, I could hardly help blinking away tears.



**September 7** (*Gloria Hotel, Tom Mboya St., Nairobi*)



In paying off my debts, I first taxied to the Danish Guest House and then back downtown to look for one L.S. Prahaka, the Good Samaritan who lent me 40 Kenyan shillings at the border post on Saturday afternoon. His business card directed me to the office of H.S. International, a machine tools firm, high above Kenyatta Avenue.

At first not recognizing me as the *mzungu* at the border in Namanga to whom he lent bus fare, the slick-haired Indian businessman was surprised that I showed up at all. He leaned forward from his desk with extended hand.

“Please sir, please sir. Can the boy get you a cup of tea?”

Like so many Asians in East Africa, he had family in Canada. I obliged by scribbling down the address of sister whom I said I would call if ever in Toronto. Then after I effused gratitude for his kindness at the border, he asked if I had any foreign currency I’d like to change into Kenyan shillings. Knowing he expected better than bank rate, I was reluctant. Still, I dug out from my neck pouch a 10 deutsche mark note— a token amount towards balancing the karma...

Back on the street I continued checking out travel agencies. I was thrilled to discover that a one-way ticket to Bangkok was about the same as a ticket to London. This confirmed the plan to book the cross Pacific portion of my return flight in Bangkok— known, like London, for cheaper airfares.

After checking fares in a few dingy walk-ups, I decided to buy a ticket at the more reliable Thomas Cook agency. For about 20% more than the cheaper options— I got the flexibility of rebooking travel dates. At the same time, instead of a direct flight to Bangkok, I was able to select a Colombo, Sri Lanka stopover...

So even though I need to get back to Canada quickly to see what I’m up against— I will get a glimpse of south Asia missed 2½ year ago. Back on my bed in the hotel room, I held up the ticket in a tingle of excitement.

*Ad. Note (Strange dream):*

Mr. Kimenyi, the Burundian French teacher, points his finger in at me in a withering scolding.

"Listen," he warns, "you can't play with an African woman's honour!"

While he is falsely accusing me of seducing the virginal Grace M., the Weru-Weru agriculture teacher and daughter of a Pentecostal preacher, I am tempted to lash back against his hypocrisy... Even as a newly married man, did he not have a fling with Bella K.?

At that moment, I remember my own opportunity with a seductive beauty who looked just like Bella. Yet when she undressed and revealed thick black fur covering her legs— I shrank in horror from what must have been a *mjini* [jinn].

Had I been tricked, I might well have ended up like the poor fellow in Dar es Salaam whom Mr. Chobya, the Physics teacher, had described in his tall tale— the taxi driver who was driven mad by a goat-legged *mjini* masquerading as his wife...

**September 8** (*Gloria Hotel*)



Though the day, I took a few nibbles of delights missed in Tanzanian frugality. On the terrace of the Norfolk Hotel (one wing still boarded up 9 months after a terrorist bombing) I savoured a breakfast croissant and later in the afternoon enjoyed a cold Tusker in the ivory room at the Hilton.

Meanwhile, in trekking the city streets I have been amused by advertising messages— after being so long in their absence in Tanzania:

Along the shop fronts of Tom Mboya St. and Kenyatta Ave. (ironically named after Mau Mau heroes) there was a big breasted black manikin in an upscale shop window:

*'Wouldn't this look fantastic on you?'* tempted the sign behind her. A poster in a chemist's shop window printed under a picture of a tousled blonde in cut off blue jeans, read: *'Rough Rider condoms: studded for extra pleasure.'*

A little later, I overheard two boys in primary school uniforms outside the electronics shop window pointing and talking excitedly in English:

"That TV's mine!"

"No, it's mine," said the other "that one— and that one, too— are mine!"

So very early begins the seduction by the *kasumba* [opium] of the marketplace!

Then in a supermarket (where I bought a few snacks) there was a little girl with a severely bowed leg with her mother and baby sister. She held the plastic shopping basket. As they made their way to the checkout, the mother took out the bar of Cadbury's chocolate bar and slapped the little girl's hand. At the check out, she unwrapped a rag to withdraw the coins to pay for the items: a box of matches, a bar of Lux soap and a jar of Vaseline... Meanwhile, the mother pulled back the hand of the crippled girl who kept grabbing at the display of kid's sunglasses.

Watching in pity, I wondered which is worse: having no money to afford the sweets and baubles waved under your nose—or having worthless money amid empty shelves?



At a fish and chips counter late this afternoon, the radio behind the counter blared out "*Shauri Yako*"— the Swahili melody played as a signature tune on Radio Tanzania every afternoon. In a pang of sadness, I thought of house helper, Ester, standing in the kitchen looking out the window humming along. Her world, just a 4-hour drive away, already seems like a different planet...

**September 9** (*Sweet Mart Boarding House, Nakuru Kenya*)



Just to get a to get a glimpse of Kikuyu upcountry before leaving Kenya, I took an early morning *matatu* headed north of Nairobi. In the high country beyond the northern suburbs, breath-taking rift valley scenery unfolded outside the window. While my intention in crossing north of the equator was only for sightseeing from the bus window, I scarcely looked at the scenery, spending most of the 3½-hour journey chatting with my seatmate.

I met her in front of a petrol station on the northern outskirts of Nairobi where I was hailing a bus to Nakuru.

*“Ninaweza kupatata lifti hapa?”* [Can I catch a lift here?] I had asked the tall Kikuyu woman, mid-20s in red dress that stood by the roadside trying to flag down a *matatu*.

Upon hearing a *mzungu* using more than minimal Swahili, her brow crinkled in surprise.

“Of course. This is the main road to Nakuru-Kisumu,” she answered in perfect English: “There are many buses passing this way.”

“You're going to Nakuru, too?”

“No, to Kisumu. I heard my father in Nairobi was sick two days ago so I rushed down from Nakuru to the Jomo Kenyatta Hospital but unfortunately he had already died.”

*“Pole sana.”*

“Thank you.” She looked down at her new Bata running shoes. “His body was taken back by my brother and buried yesterday in Kisumu where he was born. I'm trying to get there quickly today to see my relatives but the money is a problem.”

She went on to tell me that she had left her 2 children, 3 and 5, with friends in a village near Nakuru. I gathered she had no husband. Only then did she shyly introduce herself as Constance.

“The fare to Kisumu is 75 shillings,” said Constance catching my eye.

I listened, halfway between wariness and the conscience-prodding reminder of Mr. Prabatar's act of kindness, extended to me last week.

"Maybe that one's moving." She lifted up her imitation leather travel bag and we scrambled together towards the bus waiting down the road, falling into the only empty seat as it gunned away. When the ticket taker shuffled up, I waved her hand away and paid her fare to Nakuru.

As the rift valley magnificence (deep green plantations amid the dry brown) slid by the window, I thought of the remark of Assumption Sister Fideles about '*the multiplier effect of good deeds*'. With that in mind, I did not hesitate to pay for the samosas and at the Naivasha rest stop.

Meanwhile, prompted by my questions about local agriculture, she provided ongoing commentary on the passing landscape. When we pulled into the market in Nakuru, she asked if I needed any help finding a room. At first a puzzled by her offer, I took her directions to a cheap hotel above a Hindu sweets shop just a block from the market.

The Asian proprietor looked me over suspiciously but then asked me to wait a few minutes for the waiter in the downstairs café show me upstairs. Meanwhile, the Constance waited by the hotel desk. I wondered why she assumed I needed her help in checking in.

"Would you like to get something to eat?" I nodded towards the cafe tables.

"No, I really can't stay much longer. I need to get to Kisumu. Could you— sir, could you give me financial support for my journey?"

Just how much 'financial support' had she in mind? I was suddenly suspicious.

"Sorry, "but I just have enough cash to get me back to Nairobi tomorrow.

"Oh that's all right," she sighed, "if you're short yourself, don't mind."

Just then, the waiter, with a napkin still draped over his forearm appeared and led me up the creaky stairs. The room was shabby and over-priced but I was too tired to look further. I took the key from the waiter, dropped my knapsack on the bed and came back down to the desk to pay. I was surprised to find Constance still waiting by the steps.

"Is the room fine?" She smiled.

"Oh yes, it'll be OK." Searching her face for another hint, I blurted. "Would you like to see it?"

"Oh no, I can't, " she looked away, "I have to get a bus right now for Kisumu."

"Sorry for holding you up."

"No problem." She nervously chuckled. "But I must get going."

I accompanied her half a block back towards the market. Stopping up in sight of the buses, I shook her hand, stuffing at the last instant, a 20-shilling note into her palm.

"I know this is a very difficult time for you," I said.

"Yes this is a very difficult time," she repeated, limply accepting the money.

I watched her sidling into the bus queue, then walked back to the hotel, still embarrassed for the misreading of 'signs' ... I had been a Good Samaritan until the last minute— until that witless proposition ...

In the next test of character, I resolved—I must *not* waver from karmic obligation.

**September 11** (*Gloria Hotel, Tom Mboya St., Nairobi*)



*Big-game:*

Tonight I nursed a beer in a plush chair back in the ivory room of the Nairobi Hilton while observing 'big-game hunting':

Across the thick carpet was the ornate stairwell at the top of which Kenyans in Savile Row suits emerged with their sleek mistresses. To their right, the row of elevators blinked open and disgorged the first class tourists. The European and Americans wore well-tailored safari suits or blue jeans while the Arabs were attired in sunglasses and immaculate burnouses.

Eyeing them all from their perches in this softly lit bar were the high-class escorts:

From ebony Kikuyus to coffee skinned Somalis: all the beauty of East Africa was on display. Every girl seemed to advertise her unique fulfillment of *wazungu* sex-fantasy: Some girls were sleek and tall, others bangled and bead-plaited; some wore evening dresses and slit skirts; others wore stiletto heels and one girl even sported cowboy boots. The lighter skinned girls wore heavier makeup but even from a distance one could almost swoon in the wafting of Arabian perfume.

Instincts sharp, the ladies zeroed in on their individual prey: hitching a skirt, arching an eyebrow, waving a finger... Like *wajini* [jinns] they lured with primal magic.

The marked tourists sat at empty tables and looked awkwardly around. With a nod, the girls joined them. Once gaining proximity, drinks are ordered, a cigarette lit or beaded plaits shaken. Then singly, or in pairs (even one trio) the girls trailed their game back towards the elevators. As the doors blinked closed one all but heard the frenzied tribal drum...

No need to train binoculars on the watering holes of Amboseli, when could sit there amid soft light and tinkling grand piano, sipping a Tusker Premium and see as much of prey and predation as on any safari in the African wild!

### **September 12** (*Gloria Hotel, Nairobi*)



Lurching through the streets of Nairobi in the back of a *matatu*, I observed a drunk who refused to squeeze down to make way for another passenger. Slurring with bug eyed gestures he proclaimed in English:

"Who says I've got to move down? There's no law – am I breaking a law? It's your goddamn law, that's all—not the government's. Go to hell!"

It occurred that such “seditious” talk in Dar es Salaam would likely result in the perpetrator being seized by fellow passengers and held for the police... Still, in Dar, one does not see so much in evidence the multitudes of street urchins, hawkers and shoe shiners here in Nairobi.

While this passage through downtown Nairobi and the glimpse at the Kikuyu Highlands had been very brief: I still cannot resist drawing a conclusion that the poorest of the poor are marginally better off in Tanzania than in Kenya. Still, the store clerks, hawkers—even the street sweepers— of Nairobi seem to go about their routines with more zest than do their counterparts in Dar es Salaam. More tellingly, Kenyans seem to smile more than do Tanzanians...

In the same mode of sweeping generalization— I am reminded of the wry comment of Mr. Danish Colleague, Mr. Pramming: “In Kenya you have to be nice to *sell* something but in Tanzania you have to be nice to *buy* anything!”

Of course, the Tanzanians have their national pride— their larger identity beyond the ethnic and local. They can also be proud in their fledgling self-reliance; their boldness in choosing a more difficult alternative to neo-colonialist subservience. Still, as the brewery executive noted— pride doesn't make much of a meal...

On the eve of departure from East Africa, I feel a certain tenderness— quite in contrast to the disillusionment of the last months. It is the warmth of colleagues like Tanzanian Kimenyi, Chobya and Kashangaki I best remember. Lest I forget my next door neighbours, the Assumption Sisters: no image of Weru-Weru is more precious than that of pretty Sister Immaculata in purple habit, a few days ago watering her flower garden (*“Isn’t it wonderful—“* she beamed *“the mystery of God?”*)

As regards the paranoia of the likes Comrade Msole (telling his class to refuse having me take their photos) or the dictatorial Head Mistress— there is consolation in yet another observation of the wry Dane, Mr. Pramming:

”Tanzanians seem to be suspicious when a stranger arrives in their midst yet even more suspicious when he leaves.”

**September 13 (Nairobi)**



I almost missed my flight this morning.

However interesting it was to trade Tanzania/Kenya comparisons with the corpulent Kenyan doctor on the corner of Moi and Kenyatta Avenue, our 30 minute chat effectively cost \$15— a rush taxi fare to the airport.

With one eye on the Kenyan Airways office across the street from where I intended to catch the airport shuttle, even with the knapsack straps biting the shoulders I could not politely pull myself away from the doctor’s lecture. After hearing I was from Canada (he studied Community Health at the University of British Columbia) and that I had spent time in Tanzania, he was keen to talk.

Despite introducing himself as a general physician, he claimed he was also a farmer:

“We farmers, you know, are heavily taxed. Heavily! My workers, oh yes— they really appreciate me— they don’t want to go off to a cooperative farm. They know that by staying with me they’ll be well dressed that their children will be educated.”

The conversation moved from the ownership of farm land in Kenya after Kenyan independence (“the settlers— oh yes— they were given some compensation for their land by the British government.”) to a jibing of the policy of nationalizing land, as had occurred after Tanzanian independence. Predictably, he excoriated *Mwalimu* Julius Nyerere (“What politics has that boy got left any way?”) as would expected of a *wabenzi*.



When I finally extricated myself from the friendly doctor and showed my ticket at the counter of the Kenyan Airways travel desk, I discovered that in writing my ticket, the agent had made a clerical error in the departure time. My flight to the Seychelles was leaving in 50 minutes and the airport was 45 minutes away by shuttle.

The only chance of making the flight was by taxi. Panicking, I scrambled out the door and told the driver parked at the curb that I needed to make it to the airport *haraka-haraka*. He said we were at the mercy of traffic, but managed to pull into the departure gate within 40 minutes. Having left only enough Kenyan shillings to pay for the shuttle, I had to give him a 50 Swiss franc note. It was his lucky day—and mine, too. Scurrying through the custom's gate, I was the last passenger to board.

So the Nairobi stopover was nearly twice as expensive as budgeted for. With more stopovers planned and half the world left to cross— I will have to severely scrimp.

At the same time, looming larger than the excitement of the exotic itinerary over the next couple of weeks is the utter uncertainty of what awaits back in Canada...

FWT

**September 13** (*Mahe, Seychelles; in transit over Indian Ocean*)



2½ hours out over the Indian Ocean, our Kenya Airways jet dropped out the clouds tilting towards a light green ribbon between sea and dark mountains.

Moments later in the ground view from the tarmac, the mountains rising above Isle Mahe, Seychelles, were steep and lush while the surrounding ocean was several shades of blue and turquoise.

Having just 6 hours before the departure of the British Airways flight for the onward journey east, I made the most of the stopover by walking across the dirt road from the tiny airport (my passport was not even stamped) and catching a local bus into the nearby village. We joggled past ramshackle houses on stilts and roosters perching atop dooryard boulders. Flowering trees, along the roadside bloomed in profusion. From doorsteps old men looked out dreamily, as if intoxicated by the fragrances.

The village of Victoria itself looked a mix of Indian and African. Brown women in straw bonnets sat before neat piles of tropical produce and girls in saris, some delicately holding sun umbrellas, strolled amid Bougainvillea bushes that smarted the eyes with their brightness.

While on the bus loop back to the airport, I deeply regretted not planning a longer stay; there was the consolation that rarely is there the opportunity to remember natural beauty, unblemished. Had I stayed even a few days, some sense of the mundane would inevitably creep into the exotic. What of a longer stay in an island paradise? Would one be as likely to be intensely bored as blissed out by beauty?

Within the hour, I was back on the terrace of the laid-back airport. At the table across, a trio of Japanese businessmen smiled at blonde children playing tag around the cane tables, as if reminded of miniature deer in a bonsai forest.

Perhaps all who transit here, are moved in myriad ways, to ponder beauty...



*On the British Airways flight from Seychelles to Colombo, Sri Lanka:*

My Indian seatmate identified himself as an engineer working on a construction project in Kenya. He was a small prim man whose lower lip seemed to often curl in disdain as he spoke. Our conversation began after he wheedled a 3<sup>rd</sup> miniature whiskey bottle from the drinks cart (one already drank and another pocketed) then turned to ask me for the time.

“Sorry, sir, I don’t have a watch now,” I said, not caring to explain how before leaving Tanzania I unloaded my worthless watch for a few worthless shillings.

“You haven’t a watch?” He shifted toward me in a look of genuine pity. “O, my humblest apologies, for asking, sir. I am deeply sorry. Sincerely, I didn't mean to ask!”

After I assured there was no offence, he turned the conversation to the “shoddy” British Airways service:

“On Singapore Airlines they serve champagne. I *do* love champagne. And do you know I missed my last flight out of Nairobi due to overbooking? And they thought I should be pleased to be put up in the Hilton? That's chicken feed for me: it's my schedule I've got to keep.”

After wheedling another whiskey from the annoyed hostess, he turned the topic to politics:

“Oh yes India is a powerful country. We are 850 million people. Soon we will be a world power to be reckoned with. Already we are self-sufficient in food– it won't be long before America will be coming to us. They'll be begging to buy food from us! Of course I favour the Soviet Union. I'm of the East, so naturally my ties are with the East.”

After picking his way uncertainly through the vegetarian meal tray (“They are contaminating these with meat juices. One needs to be very careful!”) he spoke more personally of his Hindu devoutness.

“I was a virgin until I married at 23, do you believe it? That's our culture – our culture's deep you know.”

Mercifully, by this time, his 4<sup>th</sup> whiskey took effect and he nodded off leaving me some quietude for the remaining 2 hours to Colombo.

**September 14** (*Sea Drift Rest House, Negumbo, Sri Lanka*)



Following the taxi driver whom I randomly chose among the 6 others vying for my attention, I blearily followed him outside the Colombo airport into the humid darkness of 3:00 AM. In the back seat of a battered taxi, I looked out at the silhouetted coconut palms as smells of rotting vegetation and raw sewage wafted through the open window.

In the 15-minute drive to the “very cheap, sir” guesthouse in nearby Negombo, the taxi driver tried to wheedle me into an arrangement for the morrow:

"Don't you see, sir how good is my English? You are Canadian, sir? Yes, I know Canadian. I have 2 Canadians last month. We made a nice trip, Sir, one week all around Sri Lanka. I will be *your* guide in Sri Lanka, sir. Oh yes, I know, cheap— only cheap guesthouses you liking. You see my English?"

Just to stop the pestering, I agreed to his proposal to show up at the guesthouse tomorrow at 10:00 AM. The hope was in remembering my insistence on “cheap” (no mentioning of “clean”, “comfortable” or “safe”) he wouldn’t bother.

Not surprisingly, the guesthouse where he dropped me off was over-priced (he certainly got a cut) but at 3:30 AM, I was in no mood to argue.

Once inside the simple wood framed cubicle, I immediately turned off the light. In the faint redolence of sandalwood and Joss stick, I dozed fitfully until dawn.



The first image from the morning walk along the beach below the guest house was of an old man with sarong draped over his head squatting in the lotus position gazing out at the waves. Was he meditating?

As I passed I noticed something quiver under his raised buttocks. Only then did I turn away in disgust. He was taking a crap! Right there in public, he was squatting, letting the

waves of the incoming tide wash under his ass. All notions of taking off my shoes and walking along the shore instantly vanished.

Further along, I stopped up to marvel the stone church, a legacy of the Portuguese colonial period and dedicated to the martyr, St. Sebastian. Still, distracting from exploration of that fascinating history were the black pigs that rooted in the festering garbage heaps at the corners of the churchyard. On the top of each, crows flapped and pecked over the spoils.

Such blight reminded me of Nigeria— where the smell of human excrescences were unmistakable in the densely crowded streets. Yet there was an even more unsettling aspect in this first impression of the country's predominant smells.

Meanwhile, there were the lingering tastes of breakfast at the guesthouse. While curried rice in the morning was not particularly unpleasant— the flavour of cardamom was overwhelmed by the odours that wafted onto the terrace: rotting seaweed and yes, unmistakable whiffs of sewage!

(What exactly did Orwell mean in observing that the smell of Burma: '*set one's teeth on edge?*'). In countering these ugly thoughts I reminded myself that any stink imparted to my nostrils was no doubt matched by an offensive alien smell exuded from my own pores. Indeed, that seemed to be well borne out by the dogs on the beach that growled in my approach...

On the walk back to the guesthouse I recalled the comment of *Mwalimu* Mwanga back in Weru-Weru:

"Those Asians they may dress up and look smart on the street but go into their houses, *bwana*. Listen, they're filthy in their personal habits. I know, I've lived with them, *bwana*!"



Back at the guesthouse reception area, the taxi driver from last night was waiting accompanied by wife and child.

"I can give you a nice cheap comfortable tour, sir," he obsequiously grinned. "I will give you best price. I help with everything..." He nodded gravely. "I know you are a sick man, sir. You not worry. What happened to your um, leg?"

Gritting teeth while he wheedled, I also felt guilty (quite as intended) in seeing his wife and cute kid smiling at me—probably thinking that daddy had a week of easy work with a rich foreigner...

“Sorry,” I lied, “I’m staying only one day. “No time for tour. I patted my pocket. “No money!”

“Today only, sir. We take good tour of Negombo. We drink real Ceylon tea.”

“No, please, I held up my hand, “ No tour— nothing.”

“Sorry, sir, sorry. I can you show you—“

“No!”

Only when his wife waggled he impatience, did he relent. Whispering hoarsely, the driver and his wife retreated down the path with the little girl skipping ahead.

Back in the room (the sewage smell wafting in from the moving curtains) I thought of the other hawkers, hucksters and street urchins encountered on the beach:

There was the Sri Lankan Oliver Twist who addressed me no less obsequiously but in considerably better English than the taxi driver:

"My father is dead, sir. I have no shoes. I can't go to school, no money sir. One rupee is a quarter pound of bread, sir."

Then there was the wrinkled woman desperately hawking hideous shell necklaces:

"Come to my house Sir. Just here, come. I serve you Ceylon tea. Ceylon tea, sir."

In the offer of ‘Ceylon tea’ (also mentioned by the taxi driver) was I missing some local *double entendre*?

Most hideous though, was the pimply pencil-moustached boy who sidled up near an oil-slicked stretch of sand:

“I don't like girls sir. I have many single men friends from Germany— from Australia. I don't ask for anything. I just like to make friends, sir."

“Go away, “ I scowled, ”I don't like boys!”

In the midst of this ugliness crept images of flame trees in Uhuru Park, Nairobi. Then the last sight of Kilimanjaro—glimpsed through the porthole of the Kenya Airways 727. Only the very top of the Kibo peak was visible through the clouds— the white dome that

I had twice ascended along with the brave Form Four graduating girls who touched snow for the first time... East Africa and those scenes of breath-taking beauty are now an ocean away...

**September 15** (*Red Brick House Hostel, Kandy, Sri Lanka*)



Fortunately, the jaundiced impressions vanished as the bus from Negombo wound higher into the lush hill country of the centre of the island...

After arriving around noon in Sri Lanka's 'spiritual capital' of Kandy, over the next few hours, I visited not only Buddhist temples but a Catholic church and a Hindu temple. Indeed, with the overdose of religious imagery there arose a dizzying merging of it all!

In the first Hindu temple ever entered, I witnessed a Hindu priest slosh milk before an altar of Ganesha, the elephant god. The atmosphere was starkly similar with that of the Christian cathedral. There was the same dead air and cold stone: only the images were different. In alcoves before wavering candles rather than images of a blue-skinned Jesus and a bloody San Sebastian pierced with arrows— there were the shrines for Lord Krishna, Ganesha and Hanuman.

Still, the highlight of the day was unquestionably the Buddhist Dalada Maligawa— the Temple of the Tooth. I was fortunate to be there at dusk during prayer time when the musk of Joss sticks quickened the pulse like the aroma of candy apples. The musk thickened as the drumming began and the Sri Lankans, ignoring the presence of tourists, pattered reverently forward to place their lotus and frangipani blossoms on a smoky altar before the massive gold Buddha framed with elephant tusks.

Many stood humbly back against the wall while others approached the inner sanctum, where the sacred fragment of the Buddha's dentistry was hidden in a giant gold diadem framed by blinking coloured lights.

A few devotees dropped prostrate, head touched the stone floor with a lotus blossom pressed between palms and held to forehead with their lips moving silently. A toddler lying beside her mother on the floor mimicked her mother perfectly bringing his little hands to forehead head on cue.

Meanwhile the tourist buses were disgorging outside the temple. The unshod tourists (mostly European with some Japanese) fiddled with cameras and flashguns before the

stairs. In seconds, the frenzy of clicks and flashes began. While I, too, had a camera in my shoulder bag, I wondered how many of these capturers of ‘experience’ have paused for even an instant to consider the significance of their being in a very unlikely place?

Despite all the focus of the clicking it was not the altar itself nor the saffron robed monks moving coolly about their business that were by my lights, the most exotic images.

What struck me was the posing so many of the tourists themselves for their prize photos: typically before the altar holding a lotus flower to their foreheads.

Yet the local worshippers took not the least offence in the milling foreigners and their ubiquitous cameras. Perhaps in a culture so ancient and secure, even the display of the rudest and most voyeuristic curiosity cannot desecrate... Therein I thought of Susan Sontag's meditation on the shallowness of tourist experience in her monograph: ‘*On Photography*’. Let them click away!

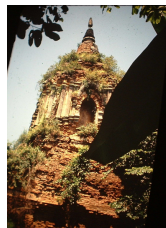
What an utter contrast was that gentle tolerance made with Tanzanian suspicion of the tourist's camera. It was Mr. Msole, my colleague and the *siasa* [political science] teacher at Weru-Weru who told his students that tourists typically took photos of Tanzanians so that they could look at them with their friends back home and “have a laugh about primitive Africans.”

Hard not to draw conclusions from this contrast about the security of cultural identities...

*Ad. Note:* There was the guesthouse landlady, a Tamil, in the Kandy rest house chiding her pet dog when he barked at me:

"O, Brownie would you stop that, please!" Then holding Brownie by the collar, she apologized: "This is rather strange. He usually only barks at Sinhalese people!"

### **September 17** (*Dambulla, Sri Lanka*)



Continuing on my truncated Sri Lanka itinerary, this afternoon I huffed up the side of Sighariya, the renowned rock fortress built in the 5<sup>th</sup> century by Buddhist kings. The final stretch was up a dizzy metal ladder with a vista down over a sheer granite cliff of expansive green irrigated countryside with black mountains beyond—reminiscent of the view from Tenochtitlan pyramid in Mexico City. Just as in that distant day in



Tenochtitlan in August 1973, the sky also boiled and rumbled with thunder which sent the trinket and Coke hawkers to huddle back under the stall canopies spread along the step landings.

In surveying the landscape of rice paddies from the dizzying heights, I struck up a chat with a blonde British girl who also happened to be staying at the same rest house in Dambulla as was I.

Fresh from reading Geography at Oxford, she remarked that Sighariya reminded her of Tenochtitlan near Mexico City to which she had travelled last year. In mentioning that she had also visited Machu Picchu, we both agreed that the Inca fortress was unparalleled in the magnificence of its Andean setting. Having also 'done' Masada in Israel, she offered yet another interesting comparison with Sighariya.

Later in the afternoon we sat together in the local bus back to Dambulla along with a gaggle of other young European 'Journeyers to the East'. On the way we photographed a vile-tempered elephant chained by the roadside and climbed to the temple above Dambulla that featured monks of varying ages, howling monkeys and reclining Buddhas.

At dinner, back at the rest house restaurant, we chatted from adjoining tables. On the morrow she was off to Polonnaruwa and I to Anuradapura. Before we both repaired to our separate rooms she said:

"I like traveling alone but I wouldn't want to do it for too long. It makes one so— well, so callous— after a while. Thanks for the nice conversation. It's really nice to talk with someone who's genuinely interested in what he is passing through. So many travelers I've met aren't really, you know."

Back in my room, I put away the packet of Weru-Weru school photos I'd shown both her and the two young Germans at another table. Comrade Msole would have been disappointed to know that the photos of the girls working on the *shamba* [farm] were viewed with respect and admiration.

Before sleep, I pulled out my harmonica and played a few bluesy tunes, concluding with '*Bring it on Home to Me*' by Sam Cooke... So what is this rush to get back to Canada?

**September 18** (*Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka*)



On a bicycle for the first time in 2 years, I pedaled through fetid heat behind the Anuradapura ruins. With a metal plate dangling below the cross bar advertising ‘Auto Stop Café’, I clanked along on the rented bike through the shady paths among half buried pillars and obelisks older than ancient Rome or Greece.

Further down the dike alongside a placid artificial lake, I stopped at points to click exotic vistas of foraging monkeys, villagers in the rice paddies and the ancient Sinhalese domes of Mirasavati Dagaba and Thuparama Dagaba in the grey distance. Even with thunderheads threatening, I rode along the footpath around the lake and dipped through the swamplier land at the inlet. There were slender Chinese storks bathing in the shallows and black pigs rooting to the bushes. Even a massive monitor lizard, no less than metre in length, lumbered across my path.

However, drenched in exotica, there was the reminder from the gaggle of Sinhalese schoolboys who ran behind my bike, that it was my presence that was the exotic note in this landscape. At first they smiled and shouted “*hello, hello*” as they raced behind but as I pulled away I could distinctly hear them making pig snorts. Fair enough!

When the rain clouds finally broke, I was on the steps of the Thuparama Dagaba wherein apparently lay the collarbone of the Buddha. I leaned the bike out of the rain, took off my boots and found refuge under a canopy along with several devout old Buddhists. As the crones sat closed eyes and chanting, I underwent a wide-eyed inspection and lapdog interrogation by a group of younger Sri Lankans.

Of course there were the inevitable questions about the empty sleeve followed by shocked silence and rapid whispering. The impression gathered thus far is that in the reincarnation hierarchy as imagined by Sri Lankans, a person bereft of the ‘eating hand’ is only marginally better off than a mosquito. It seems that being disfigured or maimed here (and thus relegated to a subhuman state) primarily serves to remind ragged morons—otherwise sound of body—just how lucky they ought to feel.

This grim impression was especially embodied in the twitchy one-eyed and horribly scarred man who stepped on the bus from Dambulla before it pulled out yesterday. After a brief introduction in Sinhalese in the aisle, he launched into a striptease presentation of

his stigmata before taking up on a collection. Moving down the aisle, he proffered to passengers a soiled sheet of paper in which a description of his injuries were typed out both in Sinhalese and in English. When he handed the paper to me, I read the word *'electrocuted'* then handed it back with a few rupees. Was it a tiny karmic exchange from one mosquito-in-waiting to another?

**September 19** (*Sea Drift Rest House, Negombo*)



I started the day by stepping on my only pair of glasses and snapping off the right arm. At least this clumsy mishap distracted me from further taunting myself with the worry that I'd left the bag containing several rolls of exposed film back in the hotel room in Nairobi.

That torment first struck when I was staring out the bus window in the midst of an especially drab stretch of countryside yesterday on the road from Anuradapura. I had convinced myself that the bag which contained not only my slide film but souvenir ivory pendants, had fallen behind the hotel room bed. So irreplaceable seemed the loss of the slides taken on the last Kilimanjaro trek, I even wondered if it might be worth flying back to Nairobi...

Still, in the hope that the bag was somewhere at the bottom of my Russian knapsack left back in the Negombo guest house, I was ready to offer to Shiva and his minions the sacrifice of one of my 5 cardboard boxes of books now in transit between Dar es Salaam and Vancouver (Any of the 5, that is— except the one containing my personal notebooks!)

Off the bus and back in the Sea Drift Rest House in mid-afternoon, immediately upon collecting my knapsack from reception, I breathlessly thrust my hand to the bottom and after a few seconds of fumbling felt the film bag. I pulled it out and touched it to lips in the blissful relief that accompanies the cessation of one's head beating against the wall.

Then turning attention to the broken glasses, I follow the advice of the kind receptionist, Mr. Fernando, and took them to a silversmith shop near the Negombo market. There, for a mere 30 rupees, the boss had one of his apprentices solder the hinge...

Two head banging interruptions: a very satisfying day, indeed!



On the eve of departure, I had a rambling chat with Mr. Fernando the lean and bespectacled guesthouse proprietor. His opinions on socio-political matters certainly corroborated the impressions taken on the streets, in the shops and even from the bus window:

While certainly still a Third World nation, Sri Lanka, in many indices, is moving steadily forward. The population appear to be decently well fed and clothed.

Of course, every shade of human misery can still be witnessed (particularly noted was the proliferation of beggars) but education and economic development is making headway against ignorance and poverty. Unfortunately over-crowding and cultural attitudes (Buddhist passivity?) do hinder development but the government Sri Lanka is certainly not among those 3rd world states that exercises power primarily to protect the interests of a privileged few.

According to Mr. Fernando, the social democratic government provide basic education, medical care and even food subsidies for the poor while allowing private ownership of land (up to 30 acres) and private enterprise through a wide swath of the economy. While taxes are high, the shops appear to be chock full of a wide range of both locally produced and imported goods— even including silicon chip watches.

“Can this be socialism then?” I asked Mr. Fernando while thinking of Tanzania's bare shelves, its currency controls; the import restrictions, *etc. ad nauseum*...

“We had a socialist government from 1974 to 1977,” he said “but they failed— they were voted out”. He swept his hand. “Even the Communists have a party but they have no seats now. If they want, they can build their party up again. They just have to get the people's votes first and get elected.”

Listening, I could only think of the poor Tanzanians stuck with their one party state *Ujamaa*. How long would *Chama Cha Mapunduzi* [party of the revolution] stay in power if there were real alternatives? If there really were a multi-party system would a majority actually vote for a dictatorship of *mwalimu* Nyerere and his self-righteous parasitic elites?

With their timidity and ingrained fatalism in accepting President Nyerere's lie that the one-party state is deeply in synch with African culture, Tanzanians submit to jerking up their fists on cue to the empty party slogans of the *mkuu mkubwa* [big chief]. Most of the

time, their effort is to keep their heads down as they bend with *djembe* in the sun scratching a meagre living from the African soil.

Finally, I recalled the political turn in the speech of the guide in the Sri Maha Boodhi temple in Anuradhapura:

“Buddha was a democratic socialist. He believed in the sharing of wealth. But he would expect the rich the capitalists to see in their own hearts the sin of greed and be moved to share. Buddha could not accept that force alone can change the human heart.”

So apart from a tiny brass box and half a roll of exposed film, I take no souvenirs away from Sri Lanka. Still, within a short week thankfully, the initial smells of rotting seaweed and sewage have been supplanted by coconut oil, joss stick, and lotus. Amid the blur of images from this too brief stopover— some hints of the wisdom of the Buddha might even serve my own uncertain questing...

FWT

**September 20-21** (*Bangkok, Atlanta Hotel*)



At the check in desk of the Atlanta Hotel, I could hardly taken my eyes off the exquisitely miniature Buddha embedded in an amber teardrop on the necklace of the girl at the check in counter. The clean soy scent wafting from up her hair was the same sniffed earlier on the airport bus. Not having showered since early morning in Sri Lanka, I was embarrassed that my western sweat could offend her fine nostrils.

Yet instead of showering, I dropping my knapsack on the bed, walked out onto the garish Sukhumvit Road to get a closer view of the flashes of an Asian Satyricon glimpsed from the bus window.

Stepping back into the fetid humidity, I almost bumped into 2 fat men in baggy shorts, walked arm in arm with button-nosed Thai tarts. Amid the roar of traffic and blaring disco, girls leaning out from jeepneys or from the back of scooters stopped in traffic to wave at grey-headed tourists. Lit by garish neon, white men at bar tables looked uncertainly into the street. I had hardly gone 2 blocks before a taxi driver called out in American English: "Hey, what you looking for tonight sir? Nice-nice massage?"

Having seen the flood of middle-aged men in loud shirts hailing taxis at the airport, the sensual overload of Bangkok decadence was no surprise. After the fall of 'Nam, new clientele were needed to replace the loss of Yankee serviceman on leave. Making it all the more alluring is the pretence that the girls actually revel in their trade. As the slick Israeli businessman who sat across from me in the airport bus ride into downtown proclaimed: "These oriental girls man, they just *love* Western men. It's like being in some kind of paradise!"

But just as in the Judeo-Christian paradise, there is an unmistakable slither under the lotus blossoms. Drenched in sweat within 20 minutes, I turned back towards the Atlanta. Yes, the temptation was undeniable but the politics just too repulsive. In the final block, I had to plug my nose against the smog mingled with foul vapours riding from an open gutter...



By mid-morning I was back on the street in a disoriented daze. Without even a smattering of the language and scarcely any notion of Thailand history, I felt even more rattled that I had 2 days ago before the chalked hexagram of an astrologer touting on the filthy sidewalk of Colombo. I could be on a planet in Alpha Centauri!

Still, in dutiful tourist mode, I visited several temples. Before the first modest street temple encountered outside the Sukhumvit strip, I stopped up agog amid the musk of incense and the tinny flap of finger cymbals rising into the traffic fumes. Business suited patrons briskly opened purses to pay for packets of incense while female worshippers in white carried bundles in both hands to set before the golden Buddha (Less in evidence here, are the lotus blossoms and multi-colored rags of the Sri Lankan temples).

By noon, I among the throng of tourists in the palatial grounds of the Wat Phra Kaew: the temple of the Emerald Buddha. Never before have I seen so many (chiefly Germans and Japanese) tourists so frantic to snap photos. Yet I, too, dug for my camera and jerkily joined the competition to 'capture' the moment. Is the frantic shuttering anything more than a defense against the disturbance of the ineffable? In ignorance amid alien splendour, 'meet perplex with shutter reflex' seems to be the guiding principle. (Click, flash, click, flash!)

Yet again, I was chastened in the recollection of Sontag's '*On Photography*.'

On my way back to the hotel I passed again through the gauntlet of bars and blaring discos of Sukumvit where crackling neon signs tempted to slake every conceivable tourist appetite...



Even in late afternoon, the male tourists seemed to outnumber the Thais: mostly taxi drivers, hawkers—and of course—the bargirls... In having spent of the day outside the district challenged by the Thai script—I was struck by the English signage and prominence of American brands (Budweiser, Marlboro Ramses). In newsstand kiosks

*Time*, *Newsweek* and the *Herald Tribune* were front and centre as if to reinforce the supremacy of *pax Americana* free enterprise.

So this is the Buddhist kingdom deeply proud of having resisted colonization? How do ordinary Thais feel about being the brothel of Asia in a tongue-locked embrace of America?

In this lurid light, I regretted not extending the Sri Lanka visit. With just 3 more days I could have gone snorkelling in Trincomalee on the Bay of Bengal... Then there was the flash of sadness in the eyes of the British girl in Anuradhapura when she asked whether I was planning, as was she on the morrow, to visit the ancient city of Polonnaruwa...



At least Bangkok held up to its reputation for cheaper airfares. In the travel agency attached to the hotel lobby, I booked a flight to Seattle via Hong Kong for \$462 U.S. It seems like a good deal despite hearing afterwards, that Penang, Malaysia, is now Asia's capital for cheap airfares. In any case, I am pleased to be staying within the budget.

With the 3 days remaining in Thailand, I hope to balance my impressions with just a few glimpses outside Bangkok. With that aim, I booked a seat on the night train to Chiang Mai...

So it is that I am comfortably tilted back here in the 2<sup>nd</sup> class coach headed north. A fan is whirring overhead while with notebook on knees, I munch lychee fruit and spit the pits out the dark window.



**September 22** (*Lam Chang Guesthouse, Chiang Mai*)



In the midst of the staggering array of delicacies at the Chiang Mai market, I fondly recalled African simplicity: *Ugali* and beans, rice and *machicha* (greens). As for sweets: instead of multi-coloured and exquisitely shaped treats— there was plain sugar cane to chew (with chaff to spit out). So is ‘simple’ necessarily ‘primitive’?

As much as I try to avoid this connection— it is hard to dispel. The idea that degree of civilization is scaled on a continuum of progress from simplicity to sophistication seems just too deeply embedded... With food culture, just as with art and architecture, I was again painfully reminded of the paucity of artefacts of high sophistication in sub-Saharan Africa. Even at the time of its fateful collision with the west, the economy of much of Africa was based on primitive agriculture and excepting for trans-Saharan trade— little inter-regional commerce.

Yet as so many African intellectuals bitterly challenge: ‘*What about the achievements of Zimbabwe, Benin, Songhai; ancient Nubia? What about the centuries of Europe’s systematic exploitation?*’) Undeniably an almost wilful ignorance of African history is all too common. The denial of African achievement—as charged— has served to ease consciences in the west for the atrocities of the slave trade.

Still, it seems overly simplistic (if not patronizing) to overstate the glory and sophistication of pre-colonial African states—certainly in comparison with those of ancient Asia. It is difficult to make the case that Benin bronze masks are as intricately worked as Mahayana stone sculptures or the Zimbabwe ruins quite as impressive as Angkor Wat...

In recalling the chat with the British girl at Sighariya in Sri Lanka, I thought again of the arbitrary features of geography and climate (*e.g.* suitability to irrigation for rice cultivation) that seem to be key determinants in the development of civilization. In such regard, Africa— apart from the Nile valley— was disadvantaged.

A larger question is to what extent the achievement of a ‘civilization’ is to be evaluated only in terms of enduring material artefacts. It may be that African pastoralists of old were more content than the peasants of ancient Asia toiling in rice paddies...

Also, as the Tanzanians liked to point out: social welfare within a tribe or clan ought to be considered higher attainments of civilization than material artefacts— especially those produced at autocratic behest. In the treatment of elders, for example, were the ancient Thais more ‘civilized’ than the Wachagga of Kilimanjaro?

In making my purchase of bananas, a star fruit and some juicy rambutan, I reflected that achievements of material culture ought never to be a basis for assessing human dignity.

The salient fact remains that all strains of humanity— each by our particular stratagems whether invented, borrowed, shared or stolen— have arrived at the present age together...



In relishing the opportunity to practice his limited English, the abbot at Wat Khuan Khama gave me a brief audience from his cot in an alcove at the side of the temple.

"You have no master?" He asked smiling.

"No," said I, "I am my own master."

Good— very good!" he laughed his thumb pointing upwards. Afterwards he posed for a photo of us together (taken by another tourist) and walked me to the foot of temple steps where I had parked my rented bicycle. His parting handshake was the tightest and warmest received in months...

In pushing off, I chewed on the latest morsels of conversation. What does a doctor in Nairobi, a small landlord in Sri Lanka, a Swiss businessman on a Cathay Pacific Airlines flight from Sri Lanka and a Buddhist abbot in Chang Mai, Thailand, all have in common?

Interesting that in so many chats touching upon politics in the last few weeks, one point of agreement has emerged: a distrust of socialism. Of course any disciple of St. Vladimir Illyich Lenin could point out that the encounters of a bourgeois tourist are likely to be limited to encounters with other bourgeois tourists speaking the same language (English) of international commerce. Are we all not merely reflecting our class interests: fearing a shake up by which the dispossessed would demand a greater share? Partly true, but surely there must be a third alternative between the economies of cheerless frugality and obscene greed...

**September 24** (*Lam Chang Guesthouse, Chiang Mai-Bangkok*)



So what was exactly going on with the desk clerk girl, a Chinese Thai?

This morning when I had ordered a cup of tea on terrace or the guesthouse restaurant, she (doubling as server) ignored me for nearly 20 minutes while serving others. When the tea was finally plonked before me— in my annoyance I asked her why it took so long. With tightly pursed lips she asked a handsome young Australian backpacker at the nearby table to come to her aid:

"If you don't like the service here, go somewhere else," said the Aussie gruffly as the girl nodded.

Then this afternoon, when I came back to the guesthouse from the Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep [mountain temple] she was brusque again when I asked for the room key. Then when I accidentally touched her hand in taking it— she flinched.

But that little slight only confirmed my suspicions still churning from yesterday morning soon after I arrived at the guesthouse by rickshaw from the train station. I was just settling into my upstairs room when a female voice called sharply outside the door. It was that of the desk clerk girl who had seemed oddly nervous when checking me in.

"Will you come down here please?" she repeated in English.

At the bottom of the rickety stairs a bicycle cop was removing his sunglasses.

"Passport?"

When I retrieved it and handed it over, the cop carefully held it open while thumbing through a tiny notebook. Longhaired backpackers passing in and out of the lobby glanced over inquisitively. Throughout the examination, the desk clerk girl stood by with pursed lips. Catching the eyes darting to the empty sleeve, I had to wonder whether *'the Fugitive'*, featuring the furtive one-armed killer, was popular on Thai TV.

Unfortunately, this little episode is likely to be associated with my Chiang Mai associations rather more than the magnificence of its temples.



Instead of going back by train, I took the 1<sup>st</sup> class night bus back to Bangkok. For a cheaper fare, the trip was faster (only 8 ½ hours) and more luxurious: fully reclining seats with blankets and a blue uniformed hostess who awoke passengers with an angelic voice while proffering a tray of iced Coke, fresh fruit and fried chicken... It was amusing to recall that the metal-seated Majira bus that pounded down the dusty road from Moshi to Dar es Salaam was also designated as a ‘luxury’ service...

By 7:00 AM I was back from the Bangkok bus station to the Atlanta hotel lobby. While I was checking in for my final night, down the stairs charged a gangly Yankee youth with a pair of brown Thai girls clicking on high heels after him.

So was his little *ménage a trois* just another fringe benefit of the *Pax Americana*?

Catching his smug grin, I could all but read his thoughts: “*All the bitches cared about was what was in my wallet. But wait until the guys hear about this!*”

Strangely enough, this spectacle gave way to a recollection from Tanzania a few days before departure. It was of Jessica, the Horuma Sisters’ house girl, at the garden tap washing her feet. With both hands she clasped her calves as she looked over her left shoulder shyly smiling...

For once, a sense of beauty overwhelmed the ugly.



**September 26** (*Ritz Hotel Kowloon, Hong Kong*)



Amid the crowds of shopping on Nathan Road, the initial impression of the Kowloon emporium was similar to that of the Las Palmas beach strip in Las Canarias in January, 1979. Yet in Hong Kong the wattage was 1000 times more intense. Pushed along in the crush, a few grim analogies sprang to mind: human anthill on amphetamines; pimple on the belly of China; gargantuan whorehouse...

"Hong Kong is marvellous!" a Polish lady on the airport bus had gushed: "Really! Just the natives live up there on the sampans. The foreigners really have these marvellous penthouses overlooking the harbour in Tiger Balm Gardens with Victoria Peak in the background. It's marvellous!"

Through the evening I pounded the neon streets of Kowloon unloading my dwindling dollars on consumer delights: I bought a camera flash, miniature tape recorder (replacing the one sold to Russian comrade, Mr. Pazharov), a Seiko watch and a big-boom stereo tape-cassette player.

Meanwhile, I took note of the 'western' fashions not unhappily missed during my 2 years in African isolation: the short tight jackets (both male and female) 'punk' hairstyles and most jarring— the prevalence of 'Walkmans': miniature stereos with earphones which more than half of the passing youth seemed to be sporting. Such a private indulgence in what ought to be shared, struck me as a masturbatory decadence...

*Rush of paranoia:* I am still reeling the bicycle cop's check of my passport in Chiang Mai and the photo taken of me as I boarded the luxury bus to Bangkok 2 days ago... Then within an hour after checking back into the Atlanta Hotel— there came a loud rap on my door.

This time, I was not merely called down to the lobby— but it was two cops at the door demanding entry. While they checked my passport and even sniffed around the room, I was stung more deeply with the suspicion that whatever the guesthouse clerk back in Chiang Mai had told the bicycle cop—must have triggered surveillance. That targeting would likely continue until I boarded the departing plane.

Even in that howling alarm, I did not expect suspicion to follow me to Hong Kong. Yet upon arrival at the Hong Kong airport— after a sharp interrogation, I was motioned by

the fat English customs officer to stand aside. While other travellers breezed through my knapsack was emptied.

Was I suspected being a heroin ‘mule’— having made a quick stopover in the Golden Triangle? Paranoia aside, it not illogical to conclude that a nervous fellow sporting an empty sleeve and travelling alone across the world would attract the attention of authorities. Indeed, a ‘*Fugitive*’ generated phobia may have nothing to do with this at all...

**September 27** (*Ritz Hotel, Hong Kong*)



I slipped in the bathtub this morning and fell backwards through the shower curtain onto the floor. I twisted and gasped for breath just as after the slip on the rocky shore of St. Andres island in April, 1976 and as after the fall from the back of draught horse outside the native village in August, 1970. In both episodes I panicked with the horror that the spine might have been damaged. Mercifully, this time again there was no numbness in the limbs. Within a few minutes I was up cursing my clumsiness. Next time I may not be so lucky...

With shopping list filled, I took the afternoon ferry over to Victoria Island and browsed through a few backstreet junk shops. Most amusing were the basins of red buttons all bearing the likeness of a notable former leader inscribed thus:

*‘Chairman Mao: leader of communist China, 1949-1970 \$5 each.*

Another warren of streets was chock-full of ivory carvings of every description. The moral outrage was immediately quashed in the reminder that I happened to be carrying a few ivory trinkets. Are crudely carved pendants hawked on the street in Arusha any less contributory to a monstrous trade than the exquisitely carved tusks bought by Chinese millionaires in Hong Kong? Are the crude pendants any less likely to come from poached elephants?

Maybe someday, I will actually have an inch of rectitude to claim. In the meantime, all the better that hypocrisy should sting like iodine...



Back in Kowloon, my feet were swollen from hiking the garish streets. Before squeezing back to the closet sized room, I lingered momentarily in a few subterranean nightclub doorways tempted to go in for a drink. Yet curiosity turned to disgust when a yellow-toothed fellow touched my elbow in front of the Miramar Hotel:

“Hey, you want to get happy-happy?”

He winked towards 2 Chinese women tight dresses a few metres behind him staring out into the street. Both had tight hard faces and neither could have been younger than 45.

I shook my head and walked on. If they had been gorgeous and I had been flushed with cash— would I have declined? Honestly, for all railing against the flesh trade in Bangkok— I can not say... At the same time, how can I forget the casual encounter in Kpalime, Togo just 2½ years ago? Social censure aside— given the coarsening effects of such casual encounters— what hope remains for tenderness and authentic intimacy?

A few blocks south of the bar district I stopped momentarily outside a floodlit children's playground. In watching young fathers pushing their almond-eyed daughters on swings and down slides, the eyes misted. Is there still time to hope for that?

Back in the cubicle, it struck me again that I was now 30 years old. That milestone was passed 2 days ago, when I was flying here from Bangkok, staring out through the clouds at glimpses of the dark green mountainous terrain of Vietnam.

So all the illusions about ‘preparing for the ‘future’ are behind me. From this age, any ‘unrealized potential’ is self-delusion. This *is* the future!

*(Continued in Part #2)*

*From black notebook with red binding purchased in Lutheran stationery shop in Moshi, Tanzania, 1980 (transcribed, 2000)*