

South to the Magic Kingdom

An infidel and his son on an American haj:



Crossing the border:

“So how do you fellas know each other?”

MH rolled his eyes before the buzz-cut Custom’s man at the Blaine border. I ‘tsked’ and gave a dry chuckle.

“He’s my dad!” said my 14-year-old son.

“Dickhead,” I whispered as we waited by the door to re-board the bus. “They are trained to consider everyone coming to their borders as a potential terrorist. They deliberately try to trip you up—just to test your reactions. Don’t take it personally, honey.”

Still, the knitting of his brow suggested that the moment was a revelatory one for him: For the first time he was stereotyped as ‘young black male’—accompanied by a middle-aged white man—one with a gloved prosthetic hand, no less. We were hardly a typical father-son pairing. Might this budding social awareness engender in him something of the shriveling self-consciousness which I have known too well? From his gaze out the rain-streaked window it was clear that my son was still processing the encounter.

“If it wasn’t for the wash-out on the tracks we could have taken the train right from Vancouver,” I said feigning normalcy.

I patted his shoulder, reminding myself just how more deeply mature he is than was I at 14...

Tilting the seat back for the 2 hours to Seattle, I recalled a bus trip to California in the mid-‘70s: just as this morning, I had filed out of a Greyhound bus into the same customs bay and pulled my knapsack on the same metal table where we laid our bags this morning with the same meek demeanor as fellow passengers. The homeland security enforcer thumbed through our train tickets this morning with the same tight jaw as the Customs officer who flipped through my thin sheaf of traveler’s cheques 32 years ago. The scowls of both seemed to telepath the same message: *‘if I was in charge—I’d find a way to keep out your filthy kind!’*

Pulling away from the U.S. customs on that May morning long ago, I felt rather like Fool of the Tarot pack with dogs nipping at heels. On this March break getaway 32 years later with my beloved son, thankfully, I am vastly less self-absorbed...



On the Starlight Express:

The normal 30-hour Amtrak trip from Seattle to LA on the Starlight Express would have been grueling enough, but with delays parked on sidings and a trestle fire near Sacramento detouring all rail traffic from the normal route—the journey took more than a day and a half. With the detour, we had to bus inland to Stockton to catch a train to Fresno. When we reached Bakersfield, we were herded back on a bus to complete the journey to Union Station in LA...

Yet harder to endure than the tedium sleeplessness and execrable cafeteria offerings were the chilly vibes. Quite in contrast to the usual cameraderie of train travel, the largely white retirees seated around us, stared uncomfortably away. I was almost reminded of the apartheid segregated train trip from Johannesburg to Durban *circa* 1982, suspicion of thought-crime (not to mention the empty sleeve) made for a most uncomfortable journey.

MH seemingly content with his iPod, did not complain about the deprivations while I stared out the window and eavesdropped upon the curious snippets of American speech:

” Ok, let’s do a switcheroo here,” said the conductor outside Portland.

“Look at them big ole Tom turkeys out there,” said a Montana cowboy near Redding, “and me with no gun!”

Still, I enjoyed the view. For hours we crawled through the yawning plains of the San Fernando Valley, where the expanses of mono-cultured crops stretched into 360-degree horizons. As the stunning landscape rolled past the train windows, it stuck me that the more fertile the land is, the more likely it is to be soaked in blood shed by those who vied over centuries for its possession. Therein I recalled Steinbeck’s descriptions of his Salinas Valley—possibly the most fecund agricultural terrain on earth—wrested from the Spanish colonists by the Anglo-Saxon pioneers. Even in his time, the California Central Valley must have been a patchwork of little farms—heartbreakingly fertile. After barely 8 decades of their amalgamation under the stewardship of the heartless ‘efficiency’ of agrobusiness conglomerates, amazing that the land still has vitality to give...

Also, as the vistas of the Central Valley rolled past the window, I thought of the glacial-scraped swampland of my origins. Hard not to see much of New Brunswick (with possible exception of the Saint John River Valley) as ‘godforsaken’ land, left behind as a booby prize for those too meek or lazy to risk contending for something better...



Union Station, Super 8 motel and Skid Row:

After hitting the ground in Union Station, LA, rubbery-kneed, half-starved and groggy from nearly 40 hours in slow motion, it was the MH’s resourcefulness and wits that we depended upon. He readily agreed to carry the heaviest bag, and then got us to the right city bus to the Echo Park area where we’d booked a room at the Super 8 motel on Sunset Blvd. Even it was the first glimpse of the strong adult son guiding a befuddled old man, I was touched...

We dropped our bags in our room and then headed out for Mexican food. Back with a supersize can of Heineken and snacks for MH from a convenience store, we indulged in the luxury of stretching out. I was asleep in my twin bed long before MH turned off the TV...

In the early morning, we took the ‘continental breakfast’ in the lobby nook while Mexican maids tried to fix the malfunctioning coffee machine. Just watching them nudge one another and roll eyes, was a pleasure. Aware that it was a visit to Disneyland— not Mexico— that MH had been promised— it was still tantalizing to be reminded that Tijuana was just a 2-hour drive south...

Later in the relative quiet of a Sunday morning, we walked south from Cesar Chavez along Grand Ave. to the seedy Jewelry District area. The notices of revival meetings in the marqueses of old theatres reminded that we were passing the neighborhood where 70 years ago, Aimee Semple McPherson preached. Today, the birthplace of modern American evangelism was rife with hawkers handing out handbills in Spanish.

In veering back along 6th Ave. towards Union Station, we moved though the swarming seedy shop fronts of cheap wares and Mexican imports before crossed into the Santay warehouse district. Whether unintentionally— or by perverse design— our route led straight into the heart of the most sordid Skid Row in America.

“Just keep moving quickly, M. Don’t make eye contact!”

At first tempted to double back, we strode on through the 6-block gauntlet of windowless warehouse streets littered with filthy clothing cardboard and plastic shelters. We dodged lumbering zombies, grizzled grey heads and Rasta-men in wheelchairs— sometimes barely

managing to avoid stepping on curled up wraiths. It occurred that the prosthetic hand that so often jarred whiter milieus—in this location—may have offered something of a talisman of protection.

Out of the Skid Row gauntlet, we hailed the first bus—one headed to Union Station. When asking direction to the California African American Museum, the white driver asked us where we were from. He then proceeded to warn us about the dangers of walking in “dangerous” neighbourhoods: insinuating that walking in non-white south LA was quite as risky as Skid Row.

In any case, he directed us to our transfer point for the 15-minute ride south to Exposition Park. After the brief tour of the forlornly near empty museum, we walked to the adjacent campus of the University of Southern California.

“I’d sure like to go here!” said MH, beaming his first grin of the last 3 days.

We took a few photos and then caught the ‘loser-cruiser’ back north along Figueria. Among the elderly African American and Mexican passengers, we felt at ease—quite in contrast to the nervousness among the Amtrak whites. For a poignant moment, I recalled the legendary verses of Jose Marti: ‘*Con los pobres de la tierra/uchar los versos del alma.*’ How could I have forgotten that vow made on the Gringo Trail more than 30 years ago?



Santa Monica:

We rested up in our motel room munching Subway sandwiches before heading back out in late afternoon for further exploration. We caught a westward bound bus towards Santa Monica. At the posh corner of Wilshire and Rodeo Drive, a black Mercedes crept alongside the bus wherein a business-suited Chinese man at the wheel flicked up his wrist to check his watch (no doubt a Rolex). It was mind boggling to consider that this man and the denizens of the Santay warehouse district, AKA Skid Row, are of the same planet—let alone of the same biological species.

In Santa Monica, we weaved for a few blocks along the boardwalk among dog walkers, joggers, skateboarders and jugglers before walking onto the beach. For a few moments we watched surfboarders in wetsuits readying for the grey waves and then continued walking towards the silhouetted Ferris Wheel on the Santa Monica pier.

Just before reaching the pier, we were startled by the expanse of neatly laid out white and red Styrofoam crosses. A few metres closer we saw a few grizzled men sitting in wheelchairs in front of replica coffins draped in the Stars and Stripes. The political buttons on their caps and jackets identified them as veterans. Behind them was a large sign proclaiming ‘Arlington West’.

It informed that every marker in the expanse stood for a U.S. armed service member killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The red markers represented each of the dead within the current year...

Yet the moment of silence that followed the shock of this spectacle was quickly disturbed. A few steps away was a street theatre protest by a Falun Gong group. Comparing the numbers of onlookers, it was obvious that the alleged harvesting of the organs of political opponents of the government of China was more interesting to Santa Monica's Sunday strollers than a reminder of their government's most recent squandering of blood and treasure. I thought of the story of the native Caribs of Hispaniola, who in first witnessing the ships of the *Conquistadores* at anchor, apparently ignored them. They hoped that the apparition might simply disappear...



Nightmare of separation:

In late afternoon we boarded the Wiltshire bus to head back to our motel room. Both of us were standing in the middle of the crowded aisle when the bus pulled over at the stop which I assumed was our transfer point. MH moved towards the back down exit while I, stupidly, tried to push towards the front door. Held back by incoming passengers, I was unable to exit. As the doors closed and the bus edged back into the traffic, I caught the glimpse of MH standing stunned on the sidewalk. Trying not to panic, I made my way to the front of the bus and told the driver that I'd been separated from my son.

"I can't stop here," he said.

I had to wait 8 excruciating blocks before he finally pulled over.

"You should catch the bus across the road," he said, "It would be faster than running back."

Against intuition I took that advice, crossed the busy street and got on the next bus.

Just as we pulled away, I saw MH across the road sprinting up the sidewalk.

"You've got to stop *please!*" I yelled.

In a 'tsk' of anger, the driver mercifully pulled over.

"M!?" I yelled sharply.

From across the whizzing traffic, his eyes caught mine in a moment of intense relief. We were reprieved of such separation that is the stuff of recurrent nightmare...

Safely back in the motel room, I thought again about the public reactions we'd experienced since crossing the US border, 3 days ago. After the jarring interrogation by the homeland security officer there were the furtive stares of the whites on Amtrak nervously passing from MH's face to mine and back. Here in LA, the reactions have been more amusing:

There was the diminutive bag lady on the bus near Pershing Square addressing MH in Spanish. And there was the comradely football team shoulder bump from an African American on the bus along Cesar Chavez. From a rapper hawking his CDs on Hollywood Blvd. was the query: "What are you, man— half black and white?"

In a typically adolescent way, MH's reaction to these encounters was muted— although he did make a few revealing comments:

"I've noticed that they don't have too many mixed people around here. This is not like Canada at all."

I could not help thinking of the notorious 'one-drop rule' of American history where everyone in the south with African heritage, however fractional, was once a potential commodity for the slave-market. Still, even as readily as I given to share my thoughts with MH, I realized that such an observation could be upsetting. Let him enjoy— like any Canadian boy of his age— the delights of American sports and pop culture. All too soon his own experience will inform his opinions about the roots of North American racism. Still, sensitive to the momentary freighting of cognitive dissonance, I gently asked:

"M., honey, would you do me a favour when we get home? Would you write a couple of pages about the trip? Just write a little about your impressions before they fade. Can you do that for me?"

In the Shona fashion of his mom he gave a raised eyebrow assent.



Universal Studios tour:

The following morning, we took new Metro Red line to Hollywood. Quickly bored by the seamy tourist scene on Hollywood Blvd. (annoyed by the multiple Darth Vaders competing for photo fees) I surprised MH with a proposal not budgeted for.

“How would you like to take the Universal Studios tour?”

“Are you sure we can afford it?” he said uncertainly.

“Of course, honey. We only live once, right?”

So instead of taking the train straight out to Anaheim we explored the North Hollywood amusement park featuring such thrill rides as “*Back to the Future*” and “*the Mummy’s Revenge*”. One was left wondering whether the brief intensities of each were simulacra of typical American-style sex: fast and furious. In posing at the gate for a father-son photo with Frankenstein, another analogy came to mind. Were the thrill rides not like the brief, intense rush of cocaine—the American recreational drug of choice? Still, it was all undeniably amusing.



An afternoon in the Magic Kingdom:

A few hours after departing the freakishly glitzy miasma of Hollywood, we stepped off the Amtrak committer train into the chilly protestant air of Anaheim, Orange County. In the growing dusk, MH and I hiked across the vast Angels stadium parking lot searching in vain for a bus stop. It took upwards of 30 minutes to lug our bags though what seemed like an upscale Maple Ridge, B.C., without bus service.

It was nearly dark before we were finally picked up by a metro bus. Luckily, the friendly African American driver gave us an all-day pass for the price of a regular fare. After 2 transfers and nearly an hour and a half, we got to our booked motel near Disneyland. In checking the map afterwards, it was plain that the location was no more than a 10-minute drive from the Amtrak station. That seemed a telling introduction to the budgeting for public transportation in Republican Orange County.

Bushed from the long day, we skipped an evening meal and sank straight into the frowsy Days' Inn twin beds: I scribbled some notes while MH watched a basketball game on the sports channel.

Up at 7:00 AM, we had a greasy Ihop breakfast and then headed from West Ball Road up Harbor Blvd. and across the I5 overpass to the gates of the Mouse Kingdom.

As we approached the gathering crowd of pilgrims, MH remained silent. While he had been heroically patient with my budget travel obsessions (why take a bus when you can get some exercise?) I wondered whether at 14, he was already past the optimum age for making the Disneyland Haj. Meanwhile, his travelling companion was probably one the most blasphemous

infidels ever to darken the gates of the Magic Kingdom. Indeed, as we edged up into the crowd of eager families, it occurred that if negativity were palpable: mine would register with a Freddy Kruger on the American streets of Dreams...

Among families dressed as Disney movie characters, our clothes seemed conspicuously drab. While pirates seemed to dominate, behind us was an Indiana Jones who gave us a once-over with the hard eyes of an Orange County cop. A moment afterwards he turned his head aside and mumbled into his collar. Noting that he was wearing an earpiece was but the first alarm of the ubiquitous hidden surveillance. Were we entering a realm of happy-face fascism?

Indeed, shuffling though that immense crowd of worshippers throughout the day would be akin to traversing a mobius looped airport security screening. Even the roving Goofies and Minnies could be seen casually touching collars and cocking cartoon heads to incoming ear-piece messages... More eerie was the realization that the visible surveillance was the tip of the iceberg: most of the cameras and mikes were concealed and ready to swiftly pinpoint the slightest deviance. *e.g.*: When in the darkness of the Pirates of the Caribbean cave, my hand momentarily strayed an inch outside the arm rest—a recorded warning issued from the speaker behind my back. Even more creepy: when I nudged MH's side with a snarky remark about the passing Disney Princess Parade on Main Street, USA, an attendant suddenly stepped between us and gruffly muttered in my ear:

“Are you trying to ruin it for people enjoying themselves? You *watch* yourself!”

As for the snark on Main Street, USA: it was impossible not to be cynical about the idealized rendering of Walt's hometown of Marceline, Missouri, *circa* 1910. The clip-clop of delivery horses and the strains of barbershop quartets could hardly be more alien to the obese revelers in corny nostalgia waddling along with fledglings sucking mouse-eared lollipops.

I was rather reminded of W.S. Burroughs satiric depictions of small-town America, wherein the ruddy cheeked and blue-eyed denizens mouthing cheery platitudes were sinister extraterrestrials in human disguise. Also, in Burroughs dark whimsy, Main Street *circa* 1910, could not fail to display above the soda fountain a ‘no negroes’ sign—and beyond its last streetlight—“the ole lynchin’ tree...”

What is so painstakingly concealed in the Magic Kingdom is the dread of exotic cultures and foods; fear of dirt, fear of oddness and deformity—dread of the unpredictable—all of which, by its conspicuous absence, is starkly revealed. Indeed, the deepest inheritance of America’s Puritan forebears, *i.e.*, fear of otherness, is jarringly present at every footfall through the Magic Kingdom. It seems that by so shrewdly understanding the schizophrenic psyche of America, the Disney Corporation still successfully market their mediocre theme park as ‘the happiest place on earth’... Thus, for those who desire cleanliness and predictability and who hate surprises—Disneyland is a perfect family vacation destination...

More sobering was the reminder that beyond the infrared monitored gates of the Magic Kingdom were the boarded up and graffitied Main streets of the real America whose deterioration is ever abetted by the eagerness of these ‘nostalgic’ consumers to flock to their Walmarts...

Of course, I recognized my attitude was thoroughly cynical. Admittedly, I was even somewhat chastened by the security attendant's warning that there would be no tolerating such reptiles who might spoil the Disney magic for others. Still, I was no more equipped to see Disneyland, as enjoined, "through the eyes of a child" than I was to believe in angels, as apparently 80% of the population of the USA fervently do... Even as a child, on the northeast fringe of this continent—from where California seemed more distant and magical than the land of Oz—a visit to Disneyland was feared as a promise given only to kids with fatal illnesses...

As for the late middle-aged man, emerging from the gates of the Mouse Kingdom with the antennae of paranoia still twitching—he could only think of the Styrofoam crosses below the pier of Santa Monica beach... But what of his 14-year old son?

"Did you have good time honey?"

M. sighed.

"Yes?"

"It was OK. But Universal Studios was a lot more fun."

"I thought so too!"

So it was, father and son tacitly agreed that the mouse emperor was essentially naked.



2007, March (from blue Moleskine)