

Where is Dave?

(The incomplete travelogue)
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Fragments of a Dream

And there we were. Older if not the wiser. Driven by varying agendas and with aspirations not to exaggerate, we plunged ourselves into new adventures. The set-up, the familiar faces would do much to throw us back in time; unwillingly, competing against standards fixed way too high. And we were impaired from the very beginning; someone was missing.

Rule Britannia

The frantic chime of my Nokia roused me from a semiconscious state of rest. The drab and coffin-like hotel room quickly gave purpose to my morning, an oppressive boost toward a long day full of experience. Having showered, dressed, and reorganized my sensible travel kit I left my little haven of solitude at 4:20 in the conspicuously inhuman a.m. On my way out I was caught off guard by the night concierge, who was sleeping on a couch in the darkest recess of the lobby. Apparently he was so rudely awakened by my thrashing and clawing at the door, a pitiful attempt of escape, like some dog in serious need of a fire hydrant. In my morning stupor it took me a few seconds to realize that the door was locked and there was no way for me to continue on my journey without the help of a friendly soul. But help was on its way in the form of the burly concierge whose existence I only noted when he arose from his shadowy cot of carelessness. The hotel was a family operated one and the concierge could be a member of that esteemed crew. At my check-in the day before I assumed I had the undivided pleasure of meeting his mother. What made me think of the family connection was her contemptuous look when I had asked her: "Do you accept cash?" A poor joke indeed but even a forced fake smile would have sufficed, just enough to affirm me in my own self-delusions. Instead I was hit by that look of contempt, a look not unlike the one the concierge was presently projecting at me. I greeted him and said that I had a plane to catch. He sighed deeply and reached behind the counter, retrieving a set of keys. I was on my way.

The area surrounding Victoria Station was dark and deserted. A few sanitation workers were cleaning the small plaza in front of the station. Iron gates blocked the main entrances and the inside looked far from operational. I put my suitcase down and had a look around, knowing that the Gatwick Express had early departures; I had checked it repeatedly. Just as my desperation started to grow, a taxi pulled up some distance away. Two people emerged and continued toward a smaller entrance. They seemed to know where they were going and I decided to follow suit. If we were lost at least we would be lost together. We were met by an official, whom we told that we were going to Gatwick. He let us into the station and soon I found myself in a comfortable seat, ticket in my hand, bound for Gatwick Airport.

Had I been a less neurotic individual when it comes to time I could probably have slept another hour or two and perhaps left my friend, the concierge, on more amiable terms. But I am incapable of lateness; I would rather lose a night of sleep than having to stress for thirty minutes to catch a plane. Thus I found myself: All alone in front of Continental's double-doors, waiting patiently, stresslessly. For I am a firm believer in stress free experiences since the opposite will eventually kill you off long before your time. Somewhere inside our cells there is a tiny stress odometer and when enough stress miles have been clocked up we will all have to face the music. Not that I subscribe to the notion of determinism but it ties up well with my cynical and intuitive approach to life.

So I spent a few hours observing the travelers in the increasingly busy airport. Willfully having forfeited the opportunity for breakfast at my hotel due to my early departure, I had some orange juice and a sandwich. Eventually a small line formed behind me; the people with whom I would be flying to Houston, a mixed crowd. Some of them looked stressed. Some even tried to open the

double-doors, ignoring the line entirely. Could this be right, their expressions asked: Having stressed from London only to find locked doors. Well, there was no concierge with a set of keys this time. We just had to wait. Some would call it poetic justice. I, on the other hand, would just call it plain stupid. Whereas I had calculated with some idle time, these late-arrivers not only added additional mileage to their systems they also made fools of themselves by ignoring all the etiquettes of waiting in line. At least I did my waiting the cool way.

Finally the doors swung open and we all filed down a ramp to the check-in point. A squad of efficient-looking Continental personnel was working the line even before we reached the counters. Questions relating to security were asked and passports were checked and re-checked. They announced that the plane was over-booked and that someone would have to accept alternative routes. I was asked if I were interested in going to Dallas instead and then connect to New Orleans. I would receive a small cash compensation. Even though the cash sounded tempting to a penniless pauper I would have to stay focused on the agreement I had with Manuel. He was going out of his way to pick me up from the airport and it was too late for a change in schedule. My façade remained composed as the lady with the money worked her way further down the line of weary travelers.

Airports are dualistic. There is the normal drop-off/pick-up area, where you can find the mundane high street shops. And then there is the duty free area, a sanctuary only for the chosen few. A valid boarding card grants you special powers. It is rather like discovering a handshake by chance and being admitted to a secret lodge where your wildest dreams can come true. At least the materialistic ones. Literally, to stay with the leitmotif, the boarding card will open doors for you. At Gatwick an unbelievable range of gadget shops, perfumeries, and booze outlets try to capture the attention of the averagely stressed journeyman. Unimpressed by these pinnacles of modern consumerism I found a quiet corner of the waiting area. I checked my e-mail through a free consol and wrote a couple of text messages on my cell phone, well aware that in a few hours the phone would be utterly useless except as an alarm clock.

Fighting boredom I went on a scouting mission to find my boarding gate, which was situated quite a distance from the main shopping center. I came upon two airport officials who asked me where I was going. "To the departure lounge," I told them. They were not convinced. "Why would you go there? There is nothing out there. You should return to the shopping area." Naturally, being a sucker for authority I bent like a reed in a gale and went back, cursing myself. Like Timothy Leary said: "Think for yourself, question authority." However there was no rebellion in me at that point. Halfway back a security guard asked me the same question. He had seen me walk by a moment earlier and he was puzzled by my reappearance. "I am returning to the shopping area, is that okay with you?" I snapped at him. Poor guy. He was only doing his job.

And so I waited with the others in the shopping area until the gate opened. A barrage of security met us. People's hand luggage was ransacked despite the fact that it had been x-rayed and probed already; some were forced to take their shoes off in a search for explosives. I walked clear. Maybe I have an honest face. Maybe it was karma as I had already been hassled enough by the man.

When I go for long duration flights something happens to my character. I become strangely detached from myself not because I am afraid of flying, in fact I do not mind the experience at all, but a weird calm settles over me. Maybe it is because of my control oriented nature; as I have no control over the situation whatsoever while I am in the air, I think I am actually enjoying the ordeal

in a warped, sadomasochistic way. Usually I enter this trance, or whatever you may call it, even before I go on the plane. It is not something that happens consciously and at the very moment the plane touches down I am back to my good-old control-freak ways. For the same reason I find it difficult to do anything but to passively contemplate my situation and to study my surroundings. Reading is not really enjoyable for me while in the air. The constant movements of the plane and the actions of my fellow passengers make the whole thing a waste of good literature. I tried watching a movie on the small screen in front of me but my eyes started hurting and I lost interest. The new Boeing 777 was packed with neat features. Apart from the personal screen with several movie channels and video games, I had the option of a range of audio inputs. Then there were the large screens in the ceiling. They showed our current position and velocity and I found myself gazing at this information for minutes on end. Of course, the monotony was often broken by the well-meaning aircrew, who fed us like royalty even though we only held monkey class credentials. And in my crapulence I could always try to spot annoyances within the behavior of the people around me. It never fails. Every time I fly I am seated behind some lazyboy, who insists on having his seat reclined as far back as possible, leaving positively no room for my legs. I can pass a lot of time being annoyed about that – yet I am never really worked up as I am in my angelic “no-control” posture. And then there will be a kick boxer behind me, treating the back of my seat as if it were a sandbag. The fact that the people next to me had to get up all the time just gave me an excuse for standing up even when the seatbelt sign was on. Hail the great instigator!

Finally we entered US airspace more than seven hours into the flight. My thoughts went off to the day of school that I had to cut in order to be on my crusade. I would miss another one but those were the breaks; sacrifices for the greater good. Who was I kidding? There was no way to justify it. It was plain and simple truancy. I settled back in my seat and started kneeing the seat in front of me.

After ten hours in the air the plane landed in Houston's *George Bush International Airport*, a humid mess of a place. Well aware that I did not have time to linger about for too long I was intent on going through immigration as fast as humanly possible. The arrivals hall was bustling much akin to Ellis Island a hundred years ago. Nationalities from all corners of the globe mingled together in a surreal soup of foreign languages and sweaty, cranky travelers. Especially memorable was a young couple with three small boys. Two of them were sick from flying and vomited repeatedly on the floor of the arrivals hall. It all just seemed to have a higher purpose and I tried to stay upwind from the funky fumes, hoping my line would move and take me some place else.

Eventually I was called up to the customs official. He looked at my passport and the signed declaration, stating that I did not intend to pursue terrorist activities while in the country. He asked me where I was going and when I would go back. I have always experienced American hospitality wherever I have gone. Being faced by the greeting, “Welcome to America – when will you leave?” did little to make me feel unwelcome. It is not a personal insult in any way for I am sure they filter out many shady yet honest terrorist types, who fess up to the true intended purpose of their visit. Satisfied with my reply he waved me through and I went on an immediate search for my suitcase.

God Bless America

Life is truly an adventure and even more so when it comes to retrieving luggage in foreign airports. But I have to hand it to the experienced logistics people – until this day I have never waited in vain at the conveyor belts. My suitcase, the old and battered gray Delsey, always among the last third to appear from the unseen pits of the airport, will eventually wind its lazy way towards me. Still, the wait before it shows itself will be just long enough to instill some doubts in the back of my head;

usually I shrug it off based on my previous track record. However, at *George Bush International* a new lesson in baggage reclaim was added to the registry. Apparently the constant backlog of passengers stuck in immigration had put the handlers into a bit of a squeeze. Due to a strictly limited number of conveyor belts standard operating procedure was to unload all of the luggage from a flight into a big pile on the floor. I asked a lady where the Gatwick pile was and she pointed me in the right direction. And there it was. My faithful companion. Good Old Gray. Although my time with Gray was quite short as I handed him back to Continental's domestic service, I had a renewed and more positive outlook on the rest of my journey.

The departure gate was located in the opposite side of the airport and with the scheduled take-off time less than 45 minutes away I did not waste any time on sightseeing. By this time I had been on my way for about 14 hours; I was quite tired. The oppressing afternoon humidity of South Texas made me feel cranky and in want of a long cold shower but that would have to wait. I pulled my cell phone from my shoulder bag. Indeed there was no connection. Bored I put it back and started studying the people waiting at the gate. They looked like business people, mostly traveling alone or in pairs. Almost all of them wore suits and carried leather briefcases, which gave them a look of conservative efficiency. In my jeans and tee I felt out of place. Finally, after a short delay, the gate opened and the great security circus started once again. Bags were searched, shoes were ordered off but once again I walked through unchallenged. Karma.

The seats of our plane, a 737-400, were only sparsely occupied when we took off. I had an entire row to myself and I spent most of the time at the window, watching the movements of the port side wing. The flaps, slats, and airbrake actions are all remarkable features in themselves. On top on this comes the incredible flexibility of the wing itself in order to tolerate the immense stresses of a normal flight. My transfer to New Orleans lasted little more than 30 minutes and I was glad that I had finally reached my destination.

Surprisingly I met Manuel even before I had a chance to retrieve Gray. After exchanging pleasantries he went into a store and bought an *Alice in Chains* CD, *Dirt*, which was already in my personal collection. I was a little surprised by his choice. I knew Manuel to be a fan of jazz and rap but not of something as unrefined as post-grunge rock. Maybe there is hope for him yet! I made inquires about the motivation for his purchase and he explained that he liked the CD and saw that it was on sale. Still discussing *Alice* he led me to Gray and before long we were walking toward his borrowed car.

America is a great place. However, the experience will be enhanced considerably if you have access to a car. Manuel confided to me that he would have liked his own car – but for the time being he relied on public transportation and occasionally a borrowed set of wheels like the car we were heading for. It turned out to be an old Volvo. And once again my predispositions were challenged. Manuel, the guy who used to drive a boat of a Mercury, was now driving a Volvo? It seemed hard to believe and he told me that he was not too crazy about it either but it was out of necessity rather than a matter of style. And he assured me that he would never actually buy a Volvo for himself. We will see about that. In a conversation much later he disclosed that he was indifferent as to what brand of car he would choose, as long as he would have a car. Desperate men say desperate things.

Being back in the States after a 6-year absence was great. The sprawling neighborhoods, consisting of nothing but junk food restaurants, car dealerships, and lube and muffler places, are so abundant in America. It is the same in every town, large or small, it so archetypically American along with

the profuse number of pickup trucks, something I will never fully understand. Why drive a pickup unless you are a farmer or in another profession that demands a utilitarian vehicle? I was back with extreme prejudice and enjoying every insignificant little detail. Manuel asked about my life in London and in return he gave me an update of how things were in the Deep South. Despite the fact that he was already late for an evening class at Tulane he decided to pull over at a local Wal-mart. We had a laugh about this being my first stop in New Orleans. Manuel also made a point of stressing that the pronunciation of New Orleans was *[N'Awlins]* if I were to blend in with the indigenous population. My pronunciation, *[New Orleens]*, was definitely too Northeastern.

Soon we pulled up at Manuel's place, a bungalow on the quiet Milan Street. Again, Milan was pronounced *[Mylan]*. We unloaded my luggage and the groceries before I was introduced to Pavel - Manuel's flat-mate. Pavel was also a student at Tulane but whereas Manuel was toiling with his PhD in philosophy, Pavel was doing a master's in music. Having been convinced that I could entertain myself for a few hours Manuel rushed off to his class, leaving me seated comfortably in the living room. It did not take long for me to doze off. I had tried to be brave, fighting off the urge, even telling Pavel that I would beat sleep. But I was weak and physiology had its revenge on me, while Pavel practiced his chords in the next room.

Manuel was back in what seemed like 10 minutes to me. I tried to be macho, shrugging off my weariness. "I wasn't sleeping, just chilling around." Yeah, right. Like the perfect host, he asked me if I felt like going out. It was only 10:30 pm and I was going on a full day with no substantial rest. Still I was at a new place and there would be plenty of opportunity to sleep later. We agreed on going out but only to a local place, *Fat Harry's*. The bar was located a few minutes walk from Milan. There was an ATM inside and I cashed some green and treated my host to a shot of bourbon. And so another couple of hours went by. We discussed the coming days: what to see, what to do. Obviously the French Quarter would be an area of interest. But there was another attraction and this was not mentioned in any tourist guide: *The Boot*, a hangout for the crème of Tulane's female student body. I was all ears.

A Day in the Quarter

As the first guest to arrive at Casa Manuel I was in the fortunate position to be able to choose beds. It was not a difficult decision to make and of course I went for the big convertible couch in the living room - first dibs on the rule-the-world bed without regard to anybody or anyone; I was tired and as the light was extinguished so was the nagging voice of my conscience.

What a marvelous sleep under the gentle kiss of the ceiling-mounted 3-foot fan; the steady rush of air and the deafening silence after a day of traveling toils. A bed worthy for a king.

I awoke before anybody else, it seemed. Through the blinds I could see the blasting sunshine; it was yet another terrific day. Not really sure what to do next I decided to wait until the rest of the household came to life. Going back to sleep seemed tedious so I started making some notes of my travel impressions. Pavel was the first of my hosts to appear. When he was done in the bathroom I went for a shower, which turned out to be quite an interesting experience. Just as I had soaped my hair the water turned really hot, so hot I had to turn it off. I tried to adjust the flow of cold water but nothing seemed to happen. I felt rather like a lobster going into the pot. Then add soapy hair and soapy eyes. I gave up the struggle and washed out the soap in the sink. Later Manuel told me how to operate the intricate device. Apparently as you turned the knob you would first get very hot water and when you turned it some more the water would become increasingly cooler – the opposite of

conventional systems. But this was not something I would have figured out for myself in my early morning composure.

We ate breakfast in the kitchen. Manuel had cereal while I rediscovered toast and peanut butter. The latter is not something I eat outside the US. It is much too fat but when I am in the States it goes with the territory. Swallowing the last morsels I studied the backyard. The kitchen door was open and the grounds beyond looked rather like a jungle. I asked if there were any snakes out there. “Yeah, and cats and cockroaches”, came the smart-aleck reply. We went for a tour. The yard had definite potential but was marred by overgrowth and disorganization but it was not something a rake and a machete could not fix. We did not encounter any snakes or cockroaches and soon our small expedition returned to its place of origin.

Apparently Manuel and Pavel had an ongoing dispute over the nature of breakfast. As it turned out Pavel was partial to French toast and capable of consuming vast quantities of the stuff virtually at any given moment. Manuel, on the other hand, could not see the virtues of this otherwise wholesome and nutritious kick-starter and the issue was intensely discussed. Personally, I am rather fond of French toast on occasions but in respect for either of my hosts I opted to keep my position well under wraps. It is okay to stir up a riot in the hornets’ nest but quite foolish to linger around afterwards. And I had just arrived.

It was late morning when we finally left the house. Manuel had urgent business to take care of at Tulane so we parted at the streetcar platform, a short walk from 1712 Milan. Well, platform is not really a precise description because it suggests a raised structure of some sort and since nothing but a few dusty concrete slabs in the ground signaled a stop, the term is somewhat inaccurate. However, it was working in its own unique Southern way: not even close to precise. Time seems to be less important in hot places and if the importance of time and heat are in direct correlation with each other, New Orleans must be one of the hottest places in world. I had also noted that Manuel did not wear a wristwatch anymore. Upon my inquiries about his reasons for not wearing one his answer was, “This is New Orleans.” Not only does a watch mess up that perfect tan, it is also a constant reminder of our busy lives. Wearing one does not make the streetcars run any more regularly and leaving it in the drawer will probably make you less stressed. It is the Deep South, laid-back, all the way back.

With the specific instructions to get off at the termination point I rumbled onwards in the midst of gawking tourists and purposeful locals. It is always easy to spot a tourist. Like fish out of water we wriggle and squirm in the face of normalcy. What seems easy for the local could be an insurmountable task for the stranger; getting off the streetcar could prove as tricky as a trip to the Moon. Opening the exit doors require effort; there are no automatic doors to alleviate your path, only brute force will allow you to advance to the next obstacle.

Canal Street, downtown, seemed a bit quiet although I had no basis for comparison. Mostly I only encountered construction workers mending the sidewalk or erecting some building nearby. It was time for lunch; I grabbed a Whopper at Burger King. Inside, the premises were also slow, far from the hustle-bustle of central London. As I ate my meal a woman dropped a large vanilla milkshake from her tray, evoking the attention of the few guests. A full five minutes went by before a mop-boy arrived at the scene and gauged the carnage with disgust. In another American city it would not have taken more than thirty seconds to clean up the mess in fear of insurance scammers, doing their swan-dives and suing for compensation. But there may be a reason for that. When you have

traversed the streets of New Orleans you will know that there are plenty of potholes and cracked sidewalks that offer the perfect launch for any type of litigation against the city. In that respect New Orleans must be a scam artist's paradise. Having wolfed down my burger I brought out a borrowed map of downtown just to get my bearings straight. It seemed that I was only a couple of minutes away from the French Quarter and without further ado I left the establishment and Mop Boy, who was still wringing sticky cream as if it were his sole purpose in life.

Sure enough, I came upon Jackson Square and after having circulated for a while I sat in the sun and started on some postcards. Twice tourists interrupted me. They wanted me to operate their cameras, while they posed in front of the cathedral. I was happy to oblige. Left to my own devices once again I was struck by the relaxed atmosphere. Everybody seemed so laid-back so I tried to follow suit still feeling the effects of the long flight. Eventually, at a point where I almost dozed off, I decided to move on. I was getting a little too comfortable. Furthermore I started to feel the sun; my winter-bleached skin had little tolerance for long-term exposure. In stead I began to explore the streets and alleys of the Quarter.

Business in the Quarter is largely tourist-oriented. Besides the high density of bars and restaurants you will also find a good selection of junkshops, selling everything from semi-religious Elvis plates to the ever-popular beads that are so inherent of the City culture. Then there is a decent assortment of designer and life-style shops with products and prices to rival those found in the largest cities of the world. All this is not surprising but New Orleans would not be New Orleans without a pinch of raunchy and a touch of weird. These elements are complimented by a range of x-rated clubs, whose existence, being largely nocturnal, did not escape my eye even at the sober hours of the afternoon. The weird aspect is supplied in full by the voodoo shops. Being unfaithful to my otherwise inquisitive nature, I did not care to find out more about these morbid-looking places, afraid of getting hexed. Believer or not – why take any chances?

I was looking forward to see the infamous Bourbon Street but after having criss-crossed the Quarter for a while I had not yet seen any street signs, positively identifying it. I had to reference the map and sure enough: I had indeed crossed Bourbon repeatedly. It seemed that the signs had been removed to prevent theft. In daylight it did not look like much and as I walked its length I wondered how the mass deception could have been pulled off.

In the quiet end of Bourbon I came across a diner; my stomach advised me to investigate. Actually, the word *diner* was probably not correct because it was partly convenience store as well. I went to the rear and found two short-order cooks and a large glass display counter. Immediately I fell in love with the look of the macaroni and cheese and made an order. One of the cooks promptly grabbed a spoon, filled up a container and popped it into a microwave. Before long I found myself on a rather uncomfortable stool at the entrance, eating my piping hot meal. It was really tasty. Across the table a guy was reading a newspaper. He looked up and asked how it was, pointing at my dish. It was obvious that he wanted a conversation so I gave him one. He was a local and he had spotted me as a tourist right away. I told him that I was a student from England but that I was of Danish origin. He surprised me by saying that once he had had a girlfriend from Denmark. He even mentioned her full name as if I would know her; her dad owned a mink farm, he added. We talked for a while about New Orleans. He ended by giving me some ideas of what to visit and wished me a pleasant stay before leaving the store.

I still had some hours to kill before Manuel would be out from school so I widened my search of the Quarter and came across a market. Unlike Bourbon Street this place was extraordinarily busy. Having cruised around, looking at the wares I should have been quite perplexed at the level of popularity. One end of the covered market was devoted to food; that was fine. The other was devoted to junk, yet hordes of endorphin-high tourists like myself pranced around, looking through the piles of rubbish to find that perfect New Orleans trinket or novelty t-shirt. These are the vile items you will never use because when you jet back to reality, you will finally grasp how ugly and tacky they really are. I bought a t-shirt, currently residing at the back of my closet, thereby falling for the lowest form of con, the tourist mind-cloud. The scam is very subtle and the vendors know the theory, which is two-fold: a) When you (the mark) are on vacation you are happy, some may even be on an unnatural high, causing erratic behavior. b) You have got money to spend. Those are the simple components. Impaired judgment and loose cash. The rest is just supply chain management.

Philosophizing Around the Neighborhood

Not really knowing what had hit me, I stumbled back to Jackson Square. There a whole different show was put on for me. Two disagreeing transients were locked in a bizarre type of wrestling match right in front of the cathedral. One was bleeding from his temple and neither of them looked sober enough to stand. The spectacle had gathered a sizeable crowd that watched in amazement at safe distance. It could not be called a fight in the conventional sense of the word since no punches were thrown; in fact little movement was involved. Either protagonist clutched the other, while exchanging belligerent obscenities; it looked a certain stalemate. Then the scene took at turn for the surreal. One of the onlookers, a middle-aged woman, approached the two and tried to pry them apart. Realizing the futility of her task she quickly changed strategy and started to administer light kicks to the two wriggling bodies on the ground. Whether it was female intervention or sheer exhaustion that caused the dueling derelicts to halt the hostilities will probably never be known. One got to his feet and staggered toward Canal, while the other, the bleeder, remained seated on the pavement. The scene was over and the crowd dispersed. I found a bench close to the Jackson statue and contemplated my next move. My meeting with Manuel was still some time away so I needed a plan. I brought out the map but was interrupted by another strange sight. Although the fight was over, Bleeder still had a few tricks left of his repertoire and seemed eager to please. He was definitely on a new mission and seemingly oblivious to the blood trickling down the side of his face. His course was taking him toward the river. The woman from before was shadowing him, telling him to stop. Apparently somebody had made a phone call and the authorities were on their way. This time the woman's efforts paid off without resorting to physical measures. Bleeder stopped and sat down on the grass. Within a few minutes two police officers took over and shortly after an ambulance arrived to take the injured man away. I folded the map again; Bleeder had provided me with the inspiration. I would take a walk along the river.

I met Manuel at 8 o'clock. We discussed where we would eat dinner. The consensus was going for something authentic and moderately decent. This being only my second night in the city so there was no reason to splurge. Manuel knew just the place, a restaurant on St. Phillip, not far from Jackson Square. I gave a short run-down of the day's experiences, while we waited for our dishes. Of course the strange scuffle in the square was a central feature. The talk evolved into planning the next days, including briefly discussing how to get to North Carolina. We would have to book a car. And all the while Manuel consumed his blackened catfish and I my pasta jambalaya, I brought up the subject of an official name of this entire session. Usually every time someone of the 1995-96 ACC international class alumni meet, a name is given to that particular meeting (or summit). Thus

previous years had seen the Piccadilly Summit, the Paris Summit, and the Olga Summit to name a few. Manuel suggested naming this St. Phillip but that title never really gained acceptance in popular summit mythology. To this day it remains unnamed and could therefore rightly earn the designation the Limbo Summit.

Like moths to open flame we gravitated toward the bustle of Bourbon Street. Manuel was determined to demonstrate the virtues of the Quarter. Yet before getting that far we stopped at Ben & Jerry's for ice creams. We then managed to get ourselves caught on webcam at Cats Meow's on Bourbon and St. Peter. Manuel took notice of the time so we could retrieve the photos later.

Once back on Milan Street, we decided to go get some groceries. Manuel warned me that it would be a fairly long walk but I was undeterred. On the homebound stretch from Sav-A-Center the discussion somehow became lodged on the subject of pets. Manuel argued that pets were mostly a nuisance. The rhetoric went somewhere in the lines of: Dogs were not to be trusted and cats were only somewhat okay as pets. Only fish were cool because they hang out in water all day long. Of course this last remark clearly drew up the level of seriousness of this particular exchange. Manuel was trying to pick a fight. Still, I had a sudden urge to stand up for the many cute and furry pets and I tried to counter the onslaught. "But dogs bring happiness to a lot of people", I said. This did not impress Manuel, who launched another scathing attack on dogs, calling them submissive and stupid. "If both owner and dog seem happy, why question the relationship", I asked. This observation provoked something in Manuel's philosophy background. You can take him out of school but you cannot take the schooling out of him. "How can you tell if the dog is happy", he asked. That was a fair question. The truth is that we cannot be sure whether a dog is happy or not – even if it is constantly wagging its tail. However, the dog's actual happiness is unimportant as long as the owner perceives the dog as being "happy" through its reactions. As humans we empathize and empower animals with human traits. Anthropomorphism. What is happiness for a dog? Would it recognize happiness? Or would it take inordinate measures of self-consciousness for a dog to distinguish and cycle between different moods? Before we knew it we were back on Milan. Somehow this low-brow argument had turned into something a little more cerebrally challenging. It was not clear who actually won the argument but I felt good about defending the cute and the furry; it made the journey on the warped sidewalks of inner New Orleans seem shorter all the while deflecting our attention from the heaviness of the shopping bags.

The Swiss Posse

The morning and early afternoon were uneventful; Manuel left for school before midday and I passed the time reading and minding the phone in case Marco would call on his way up from Florida. I had a stash of Mountain Dew and some beef jerky (Teriyaki styled – obviously) to keep me company. Marco's call came after Manuel had returned; the Swiss were getting close.

It was a little past four p.m. when three road-weary and somewhat partied-out guys arrived after God knows how many consecutive days (and nights) of drinking and troublemaking during Spring Break in Florida. For the next few hours the house was a mess of semi-unpacked suitcases and weirdo Swiss phrases. Besides Marco, the rowdy bunch consisted of Thomas and Raymond, all three hailing from the same community outside Basle, Switzerland. They all spoke fondly of their highly honed proficiency in matters of drunken debauchery, while Manuel and I listened in quiet awe.

With growling stomachs we left in search of sustenance just after 7 o'clock. Manuel knew just the place. Hooters: respectable restaurant, decent food, a titty bar for the entire family. Hooters: what McDonald's would have been if it were managed by Hugh Hefner; I utterly applaud the concept. Hooters: the name rolls nicely off the tongue. Hooters! By sheer luck we were seated in the section supervised by the prettiest waitress, we all agreed on this, having carefully monitored the activities elsewhere in the establishment. My hat goes off to her and her colleagues, who, day in and day out, will have to be nice to ogling slack-jawed tourists, us in particular.

Razzoo's

Some places are magical. Potent with innuendo and opportunity they evoke special feelings to whoever is fortunate enough to frequent these mystic marvels. At night Razzoo's is such a place. It is the promise and it is the delivery. It is the dales of Arcadia, laden with milk and honey and I am the brave bee. There, time persists on a differential scale. The eye works in slow motion, catching every detail like the Indy Car driver going flat out at 220 mph. In spite of that real time bends and warps you forward in another, unforgiving tempo. The realization that morning is approaching fast will catch you by surprise and fill you with a sense of quiet despair. The song of the Sirens will disappear at dawn and you are left with the lingering sensation of something not quite remembered yet not quite forgotten. One thing is clear, though. The arbitrary visitor can easily distinguish between the different operators on the dance floor. Of course there are the girls, moving like a school of fish. Some dance alone or with each other, leaving a door open to so-called shark attacks. Sharks are those guys who lack social *grace* and just start dancing with unsuspecting fish. A maritime hit and run, you might call it. I admire these uninhibited souls, who scoff at social conventions by reacting on sheer brute impulse. A third species is the crab. These are the guys who lack any sort of social intelligence whatsoever. They are the bottom feeders, who resort to desperate measures such as coppering a feel on their way to the bar. Life in the fish tank is diverse but a single motive persists.

Beads

Prior to my visit I had encountered the New Orleans souvenir most male visitors bring back to their world of normalcy: the string of beads. These seem harmless at first: tacky, colorful plastic beads on a piece of nylon string. Yet the beads represent all that is morally degrading in the world and I love every facet of their baseness. Although I had been told numerous stories pertaining to the true purpose of the beads, none of the accounts seemed applicable to the world of civilized people. My friends will readily identify me as a character whose moral fiber has always been beyond reproach. Hence I failed to recognize that this was New Orleans, a Godforsaken island in a huge swamp, hardly worthy of the term 'civilization'. My dear reader, my ill-founded skepticism and child-like naïvety were put to shame.

The evening, it turned out, was slightly livelier than the previous one had been. Balconies lining Bourbon were filled with people. And down below, the predominantly male mob was in a state of frenzy; something was afoot. Every now and then women would appear in the balconies, gesticulating to the crowd. It would not take long before the challenge was accepted and someone chucked his beads at the seductress. Until that point the mob had spoken with a hundred voices but once the deal had been sealed only quiet restlessness remained. The woman would not leave the crowd in suspense for long. With a swift movement she would expose herself, sending her audience back into a roar of appreciation. And thus the cycle would continue. Some times the flasher could be talked into giving another show or new women would enter the scene. It made little difference for the crowd whose attention span was incredibly short. Manuel had kept a low profile. There was

nothing to surprise a permanent resident of New Orleans. The reactions of his visitors would undoubtedly be more of a spectacle as I suspect we successfully managed to degrade ourselves to the lowest common denominator of the mob. After girl number six or seven, I, too, became indifferent. Instead I started to appreciate the complexities of the socio-cultural activities surrounding me.

Rubes on sightseeing

The following days consisted of conventional sightseeing. On Friday Manuel had school in the morning but hooked up with us in the afternoon and we would all converge on the center of NOLA. We visited the local mall and spent a few dollars in Harrah's followed by an IMAX movie, *Journey Into Amazing Caves*, which, despite its racy title, only offered a wholesome 38-minute depiction of cave exploration.

Saturday we went off on a river cruise onboard the paddle steamer, the *Natchez*. Lounging in deck chairs we enjoyed the excursion down the Mississippi. A guide enriched us with informative remarks about the shoreline and depth of the river. The latter became an item of friendly ridicule as the matter was brought up half a dozen times or more. He just would not quit about the depth, which brought back associations of a very aggressive and persistent waitress we had encountered in a blues bar a few days earlier. She kept on pestering us to a point where she, too, had become subject of clandestine slander.

Switzerland/Spain

In recent days an item of discussion was the matter of transport to North Carolina. Whereas the Swiss posse would take off in their rented Pontiac Grand Prix, Manuel and I were still without transport. We already knew that we had to organize a rental as well. To complicate matters we had failed to take action well in advance and now we feared that it might turn out to be a costly affair. Having checked the Net our fears were confirmed. The major rental firms seemed off limits, taking our restrained budget into account. Then Manuel came across *Alamo Rent A Car*. For some reason the company deployed a discriminatory pricing policy. Renting a car as a Spaniard or a Dane would be too expensive. Swiss nationals, however, would get a significant discount. This was the way to go, we agreed. As luck would have it, Manuel had a Swiss license, which we assumed would ensure the hefty discount. The approach left Manuel somewhat worried, though. As he could only produce a Swiss license and no documentation for full-fledged citizenship he feared that we might be subject to a penalty.

The laid-back/paranoid persona may be something of an aberration but it proves the complexity of human nature. Manuel is that character. He is laid-back; he blends in with the Southern culture seamlessly but at the same time he is somewhat paranoid. Or perhaps he just thinks further ahead than what is practical sometimes. For every action there is a consequence, yes, but personally I refuse to believe in conspiracy theories.

I'm K'jaar

Sunday morning and the Swiss pushed off for North Carolina. Having cleaned up the place Manuel was ready to leave Milan Street too. The plan was to go to the airport, pick up the car and then return for our luggage. After a fairly long walk we got on the bus for the airport and the Alamo outlet. It was time to test the validity of Manuel's claim to the sizable rebate awarded to Swiss citizens. The woman at the counter was forthcoming and quickly all our worries were put to shame as the Swiss driver's license was accepted. "Certainly, Sir." Manuel volunteered the information

needed for the rental agreement to be drawn up and then the clerk turned to me as I, too, would be driving the vehicle. Before proceeding, dear reader, it would be prudent to mention the difficulties in having a name that is close to unpronounceable if it is read out in English. Many years ago I consulted my dad, who was no stranger to this exact issue. His advice was to stick with the Danish pronunciation, [Kair], which, unfortunately, to the foreign eye, bears no resemblance to Kjær as printed on my license. During the course of my international travels I have heard many worthy pronunciation attempts, they include the Star Wars-*esque* [K'jaar], the pseudo-Dutch [Sjaar], and, perhaps my favorite, the flamboyant yet senseless [K. J. Ear]. In this abundant array of choices I have never settled on a single standard and when the clerk asked for my name, I reached in the mental bag and came up with [Neels K'jaar]. This was simply too much for Manuel, who burst out laughing. I do not believe this consolidated our credibility in the eyes of clerk: Here are two foreigners, blatantly claiming the bonus of third nation and obviously using phony names to boot. I could already see us getting dismissed from the premises when the clerk resumed her typing. Before long we signed the rental agreement and found ourselves in the lot looking for our Mitsubishi Lancer.

We left the city at three pm, heading east along the coast. We took turns at the wheel. Getting to grips with the automatic transmission is always an interesting experience for me. In the first few minutes I tend to stomp the breaks too hard and even, in absentminded moments, attempt to use the break pedal as a clutch. Still, the frequency of these unfortunate events dissipates as I rediscover the lazy joy of right-foot driving. The Lancer had less than 25K miles on it and handled well. Manuel had another worry in relations to Alamo, namely that we would be putting so many miles on our car in such a short time span. I assured him that Alamo expected us to use the car once we had rented it and that the contract mentioned nothing about mileage. In other words, we could *ride the hell out of it*, to use Manuel's phrasing, and Alamo would not mind. Judging from the looks on Manuel's face, I do not think he was convinced by my statement.

As evening and night approached we passed Mobile and Pensacola and decided to push on for as long as we could stay awake. Around two a.m., Manuel insisted he needed coffee or he would be unable to continue. I, too, felt the tug of sleep and had even nodded off in the passenger seat despite trying to stay alert in solidarity. Continuing was dangerous and futile. We found a roadside motel somewhere north of Jacksonville and settled for the night.

Charleston, SC

Breakfast is often portrayed as the most important meal of the day. Combine this statement with the American tendency to go over the top with unashamed disregard for the consequences and you will find a succinct description of the menu items at *Waffle House*. Even the moderate breakfast platter contains enough cholesterol to reduce your life expectancy by several weeks. Whereas Manuel wisely went the puritan/continental route, I threw caution to the wind and opted for the trencherman's choice. Bacon, eggs, ham, hash browns, gravy, waffles, toast: in all its less-than-subtle, vein-clogging grandeur. Afterwards, of course, you repent. But then it is too late. A sense of heaviness will haunt you all day, garnished, perhaps, by recurring episodes of reflux. Nice.

Eventually our little road trip took us past Charleston, South Carolina. Although much of the city was destroyed in the Civil War, the enduring architectural features still epitomize the antebellum era. Its pleasant city center was very much the opposite of the dense-commercial sprawl that typifies

urban America - not to mention the intangible fake plastic feel of so many tourist spots, Solvang, CA, being a fine example. In comparison, Charleston seemed genuinely authentic and sincere.

Strolling along the picturesque streets we came across a cat lounging on a stairway. This piece of minutia made me think of our recent pet conversation. I had no inclination to open a new debate so just to prove a point I stopped and reached out for the friendly feline. Immediately the cat rose, stretched its tail and arched its back to meet my hand. *"Here kitty-kitty."* Manuel laughed in contempt. Cats are cute. And savagely predatory. They would eat us without hesitation or remorse. Domesticated dogs would not. Of this I am certain. Dogs perceive us as part of the family pack whereas cats are wholly nihilistic creatures just like yours truly.

The Moral Slide?

We entered North Carolina at dusk, reached Greensboro well after nightfall, and ultimately came upon the familiar Interstate exits of the Greater Burlington area. From I-40 it was obvious that things had moved forward in my absence. Elon *College* had become Elon *University*. Significant new developments had sprouted here and there. Yet, possibly, the most surprising of all were sets of giant billboards featuring alluring women and risqué lettering, announcing the existence of a certain Raleigh-based nightclub, *The Dockside Dolls*. Depravity had corrupted the once-pious community, it seemed. In the eyes of a liberal European, coming straight from New Orleans, the billboards seemed harmless. But, certainly, on some level, a progression had taken place; The Bible Belt had gone awry. Would this apply to the local populace, too? Manuel had called ahead to coordinate our arrival with the Zimmers, who welcomed us in typical fashion. The Z's reinforced my admiration for American hospitality.

The following morning, having spoken with Marco on the phone, Manuel and I went to Taco Bell's in Mebane. The plans for the day were loose and we decided just to roam around, doing whatever came to mind. First up, though, was touring the nearby ACC, which had burgeoned a new wing in our absence.

As we made our way up the stairs from the rear parking lot a girl approached and commended me on my choice of jeans. This calls for an explanation: That particular day I happened to be wearing a pair of dirty-washed (almost to the point of destruction) European denims, no big deal. Surprised by my sudden admirer's candor, I found myself flattered in the esoteric role as a fashion trendsetter. In retrospect I should have asked for her phone number but (idiot as I am) opted to flaunt my newly-discovered persona by providing her with the name of the franchise that churns out dirty jeans, *"Topshop, London"*: International man of mystery: Giving out male fashion tips to a mildly-ignorant-yet-surprisingly-good-looking-and-possibly-interested girl. I hate myself. Wallowing in my own smugness I proceeded up the stairs, leaving her awestruck by my quick-witted fashion flair and obvious lack of any sense of propriety whatsoever.

The journey of rediscovery continued as we went to Burlington to take care of some minor purchases at *Super K-mart* and *TK Maxx*. We passed *Holly Hill Mall* – renamed *Colonial Mall* (and later still *Burlington Square Mall*), in the US, little remains constant, eventually making our way down south to McCuskers' and the Swiss posse.

Having consumed lunch at the legendary *Golden Corral*, Marco set the agenda for the next few hours. Needing some spare auto parts for his ever-growing car collection back home we were off to the wreckers to strike up bargains. The yard was a treasure-trove and before long Marco found

himself contorted, clutching a Philips head while wrestling a nugget of gadgetry from the bowels of some long-dead hulk. It is always interesting to observe people of technical insight at work. Personally I am inept at fixing and dismantling but Marco made it look easy. Here was the guy who actually brought batteries and obscure pieces of electronics to America on his original visit! As Marco struck a deal with the owner I contemplated my next move. I had not yet alerted my former host family of my visit. And as Manuel had other plans and did not need the car, I was free to make the most of the situation. I proceeded to E. Gilbreath St. only to find strangers living at the address. I asked for the Coes but the tenants could not help me. Perplexed I returned to the McCuskers' who imparted me with the news that the Coes, indeed, had moved, only a few miles down the road. I called ahead and got hold of Sandy, who promptly invited me over.

Excessive Walking

Zero Median

If the seat reclining fascist in front of me had bothered to check whether or not his antics caused discomfort to anyone in his immediate surroundings, he might have noticed a weary traveler with a Buddha-like expression, musing on some untold adventure. In between meals, snooze time, and frequent studies of the prominently displayed machometer reading of .99 (apparently we had caught a jet stream), I processed some of my recent impressions.

There are certain experiences in life that stay with you; lingering imprints playing tricks on the subconscious. Often these impressions are of very personal nature. Some even exist in a collective context and might assume near-mythical proportions. These are components that help to shape personalities and dictate future behavior. Thus experience changed me: Twenty-three days in 1996 changed me. Friendships were cemented and legend was born. If Seat Recliner were a mind reader, these would have been my thoughts interrupted by meals and snooze time. Right there. In my economy seat bound for Gatwick. Although the cast might have been slightly different, in time, these recent experiences might become legend in their own right.