

Summer 8-2-2012

Artifacts

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Artifacts

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theater and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

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B.A. Boston University, 2001

August 2012

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Preface

Writing an essay is a lot like traveling. It's good to have some idea where you are going, but you should be prepared to wander around a little, to get lost, to follow side roads just to see where they lead. Every essay I write turns into a kind of adventure for me, full of thrills and disasters. I counsel my students to make outlines before they write, but I confess that if I ever make an outline I begin ignoring it in the second paragraph, the same way I ignore maps when I travel, preferring to "feel" my way around, following my instincts.

I don't like plans much, when traveling or when writing. But having no plan is different from having no intention. These essays all began with intention, in the form of wanting to write a certain kind of essay. What is presented here is therefore a mix of forms, a result of experiments in method and approach. Some are the results of deliberate research, a pursuit of a subject with the desire to learn about it, and then to shape information into art. Some are recounts of past experience, moments that I found myself thinking about so often that I needed to write them down, to create out of those memories an artifact of literature, to preserve that part of my past while purging it from my mind. From those memories inevitably flowed ideas, often ideas I hadn't known I had until they appeared on the page before me.

"Me and God and Mrs. Alexander" actually started off as at least two separate sketches. I felt compelled to write about the little Christian school I attended as a child, and about the day I was moved from kindergarten to the first grade. It was an exercise in memoir, but since I am not really a memoirist, I didn't know what, if anything, I would do with that material. I then found myself, in a separate moment of writing impulse, starting an essay about my belief in God. That essay led me back to the little Christian school, and then remembering the sketch I'd done months earlier. I found the file in the area of my hard drive that serves as something of a scrap heap for things I started writing and never did anything with. When I read my sketch again I was surprised and delighted, because I was reading things that I had forgotten ever happened. I don't know if the act of writing those events caused me to forget them, or if I had managed to write down some memories just before my mind deleted them to make room for something else (I don't know if that really happens; I'm a writer not a brain scientist). But the forgotten memories, woven with my philosophizing on God, produced an essay that pulls off the often elusive task of telling a story while having a point.

When I first sat down to write “Two Tongues: Two People,” it came from an assignment from a friend. He asked me if I’d written anything about the time I lived in Turkey, from which I’d been gone for a couple of years. I said I didn’t know what to write about it. Yes, I was claiming that I had lived in Istanbul, Turkey, for two years in the middle of my twenties and didn’t have anything to write about. My friend suggested that I write about a saying I know in Turkish. I could only think of three Turkish sayings. I wasn’t sure what to say about “I just sat in the middle like a fuck” or “Put it in your midwife’s vagina” (the actual Turkish word is not that polite), so I decided to go with “One tongue, one person; two tongues, two people.” I started typing, and several hours later I had written twenty-five pages recounting my life in Istanbul. I was having a rip-roaring good time, indulging myself in lengthy tangents describing particular nights, reliving my days as a bohemian expat frolicking on the shores of the Bosphorus. A lot of editing was later required. Over the next three years I revisited Turkey once and this essay many times, rereading and revising, shaping it into something that felt whole.

“Two Tongues” is one of two travel essays about that period of my life. I wrote the second one, “Fear and Luck in the Balkans,” out of a desire to tell what I thought was just a good story. It was the kind of tale I’d offer to other travelers, to friends, and to strangers at the bar who I wanted to impress. The story was a lot of fun to write, and it was the first essay that I read aloud in a public setting. I’d been asked to read at a reading series held in a bar. I chose that essay to read because it was the only thing I had that was appropriate in a bar setting, I decided. It had a surface entertainment value. It took several revisions, however, before I located the heart of that story and reached a point at which I could consider the essay travel literature rather than just a travel story. Travel literature goes beyond describing the journey, striving to express the meaning of travel. The subject of travel literature may ostensibly be the place being traveled through, but at its core the subject of travel literature is the *traveler*.

My experience as a traveler did a lot to inform my writing of “Astride Lofty Wheels.” This story is not about me, or anyone I have ever met. It takes place in the nineteenth century in an America on the verge of transformation, a couple of decades before the appearance of the automobile. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the automobile would give Americans freedom to roam independently around the country, on a kind of adventure known affectionately today as the “road trip.” But in the late nineteenth century, the American road trip was the invention of a handful of dreamers who traveled by bicycle and often depended, for lack of long distance wagon roads, on networks of railroad tracks.

How I came to write this story is in itself a little journey of curiosity. I get some of my best ideas in bars, whether sitting alone and daydreaming over my beer or through rambling bar conversations. One night I got into a discussion about bicycles. The question was posed of just how and when the bicycle was invented. I realized I had no idea, but that I would like to know. So I did a quick internet search and came up with lots of articles and a few books. I ordered a book, David Herlihy's *Bicycle: a history*, and discovered what to me was the fascinating world of late-nineteenth century bicycle culture. Having previously dabbled in historical research, I hit the newspaper archives of New Orleans to see what that looked like in my home city. One of the first things that came up was this bicycle journey from New Orleans to Boston. Here was something lost to history that was, once again, just a really good story. So I set out to find out more about these three men, the world they lived in, and how they came to do something so extraordinary.

These three men were pioneers of a kind of travel that has become a rite of passage for a certain demographic of Americans. The "strange joy of voluntary hardship" that the cyclists from New Orleans discovered is the same one that I recount in "Fear and Luck." Their encounter with the poor farmers in Georgia moved them in the same way as my encounter with the cigarette smugglers in Serbia. A writer in the twenty-first century and a watchmaker in nineteenth might be as different as chalk and cheese, but in these travelers I can see myself, and in their experience I hear echoes of my own.

This was also an exercise that I had been wanting to try for some time. Having been inspired by such writers as Erik Larson (*Devil in White City*), I had wanted to create a narrative purely out of historical research. The process proved to be, predictably, painstaking. I had to weave together scores of historical details and familiarize myself with a subculture removed from me by one hundred twenty five years. This work is the closest I've ever come to writing fiction, in that it involved immersing my imagination in a world totally separate from my immediate reality and creatively imagining scenes and characters. It was a matter of stretching the boundaries of nonfiction and applying a calculus of extrapolation to historical details to arrive at a fleshed-out narrative.

"Holly Beach" was actually my first attempt at "literary journalism," although at the time I was unaware of that term. My friend Lee Celano, a photojournalist on assignment with the *New York Times*, invited me to come along with him while he and a reporter conducted research for an article. When we returned from the trip I wanted to try my hand at writing an article of my own. I'd had the luck of being present while a professional reporter interviewed sources, and I had the background information supplied by my friend, who was familiar with the place. I did a bit of

research on my own—a few newspaper articles and some public documents. When I first wrote it, the article was amateurish and clumsy, absolutely riddled with the kind of stylistic sloppiness denounced by *The Elements of Style*. Yet over the years I kept going back and reading it, fixing it up a little each time, and every time I read it I remembered how much I liked it. I think there is something at the core of this story that speaks to a larger conflict in our capitalistic society, and to the ongoing, now universal, struggle between clinging to the past and rolling forward in modernity. What it had was good ideas, and I'm a firm believer that almost anyone can learn to write good prose, but a story is only as good as its ideas. Without good ideas, the best prose in the world is useless.

My forays into journalism later took me into my own neighborhood with "A Beautiful Day in 'The Neighborhood.'" Having lived in the Bywater for a couple of years, I was keen to write an ode to a place I had fallen in love with. The scene of the little music festival made for great opportunities in descriptive writing. If "Astride" is the closest I've come to writing fiction, "Beautiful Day" is the closest I've come to painting. I avoided my usual reliance on exposition and tried to let the scenes speak for themselves to convey the sense of wonder I felt for the place. That neighborhood is rapidly changing now, and in ten years I'm not sure it will be the place I describe. Even my own giddy newcomer's enthusiasm has subsided. If I wrote an essay about the Bywater now it would be more realistic, colored with cynicism about gentrification and bitterness about the encroachment of the same influences that have changed Holly Beach. But I'm glad that I wrote that essay like I did, when I did, because I don't ever want to forget the dreamy idealism that inspired it.

Dreamy idealism, and its downfall to capitalism, is also at the heart of "Fabric Warrior." When I met Zahdan I quickly realized that I had a subject bursting with potential for a profile essay. I had never interviewed anyone at length before. Zahdan made it easy, as he was eager to talk about his life and full of stories and quote-able lines. He also made it hard, because he gave me so much material that I found myself buried in notes, attempting to untangle the chronology of a life as told to me in wild loops and narrative leaps. But that research then took me far beyond Zahdan's workshop and onto a pursuit of another story—the development of tie-dye in America. I hadn't even known such a story existed. It was something I found by casually searching for a few facts to give background to the profile. As I searched, those facts started linking to each other, pulling me along on a road into the past. While I was working on the story people asked me what I was working on, and when I replied that I was writing about tie-dye, I was met with heavy skepticism. "It's more interesting than you think," I replied. In Zahdan's account of how he

became a tie-dye artist he tells how at first he was completely uninterested in it but was one day bitten by the “tie-dye bug.” I guess I got bitten, too.

These essays are not so much about telling not so much what I know but where I have traveled in my thoughts. Sometimes they tell of places I have been, or where others have been. But they are not about those places so much as what it is like to go to those places. They are ultimately not about the journey but the journeyer. I had my adventures in writing them, and I hope that my reader will have adventures in reading them, in wandering around through my ponderings, my curiosities, my memories, my daydreams.

Me and God and Mrs. Alexander

Growing up as I did in south Louisiana, I was bitterly disappointed not to be a Catholic. The ornate cathedrals, all those saints, the mysterious rituals: Catholicism was far more appealing to me than the plain Protestantism I was stuck with. I was, however, barely even a Protestant. My family did not go to church. My mother, while not an atheist, regarded the church with the same contempt she held for all social groups outside of family. There were no religious objects in my house and my mother never spoke of religion. We prayed exactly twice a year--just before Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner.

So, it is a peculiarity of my upbringing that, through the sixth grade, I was sent to a very small private school called Community Christian Academy. This school was run by a couple of sisters-in-law who were members of a restrictive denomination called the United Pentecostal Church. Female members are easily identifiable. They are forbidden to cut their hair (not even a trim) or wear pants, sleeveless shirts, make-up, or jewelry. Male members are required to keep their hair short and are discouraged from growing facial hair. Never mind that Jesus himself, according to pretty much every depiction of him since the sixth century, wore long hair and a beard. During their regular Sunday worship services, which I have never attended, members of this church are known to “speak in tongues” and roll around on the floor. My mother called them “holy rollers.”

Community Christian Academy was a private school, but it was not an elite school. The tuition was minimal and the education offered was comparable to the local public schools. Originally intended as a shelter for Pentecostal kids whose parents did not want them exposed to the corrupting influence of secular education, CCA became a de facto refuge for kids who had either been expelled from the public school system for misconduct or whose parents did not want their children put in special education classes because they were “special.” Most kids who went to this school were either “holy rollers” or deemed unfit in some way for normal school. My mother had little reason to send me there. We lived in a rural suburb of Baton Rouge where the local public schools were not great but not anything to run screaming from. She says she sent me to that school to give me a “good foundation,” and I don’t know exactly what that means. If she sent me there hoping I’d become a good Christian, it did not work

and she doesn't seem disappointed. But the lasting effect of that early education on my personal philosophies and political views is a thing I'm recently coming to apprehend. It seems that, despite my failure to become a church-going Christian, my Christian education has not been lost on me.

In grades kindergarten through twelve, CCA enrolled about 100 students. There were only a handful of high school students, and, through the eighth grade, two grades were taught together in a classroom with one teacher. Students wore uniforms—plaid pleated jumpers for the girls and blue polo shirts for the boys. The girls were allowed to come to school with their hair cut but not wearing make-up or jewelry. Certain Fridays were “formal normal” days, meaning we didn't have to wear uniforms so long as the girls wore skirts that covered their knees. Having never experienced anything else, the school dress code did not seem to me draconian. School just had different rules from home.

Each morning, after the teachers had taken a few minutes to welcome the students and call the attendance, the school bell would ring and all of the students would file out of their classrooms, down the breezeway, and into the little sanctuary for the morning ritual called “chapel.” We all filed into the two columns of powder-blue-upholstered pews according to class, with the youngest children all the way in the front and each successive class filling in towards the back, so that growing up in that school was a matter of moving farther and farther away from the matronly Mrs. Alexander—vice principal, first- and second-grade teacher, and leader of religious instruction.

Mrs. Alexander stood in front of the little congregation every morning wearing a near-ankle-length skirt and long-sleeve blouse or jacket—I remember a lot of floral and stripe--her dark hair piled atop her head in the Pentecostal fashion, and led the opening prayer. She would request that God watch over the students and the teachers and then for the recovery of any student, parent, or faculty or staff member who was ill. (When I came to school with a broken arm in the first grade, Mrs. Alexander prayed for my arm. When I was in the sixth grade, she prayed for my brother's appendix.) Then we all turned to the right, placed our hands over our hearts, gazed through the tall skinny windows of the sanctuary towards the American flag raised on its pole out by the gravel parking lot, and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. We sang hymns with a piano accompaniment by Mrs. Strain, the fifth- and sixth-grade teacher, and received religious instruction based on the weekly scripture. Each week Mrs. Alexander wrote out a scripture in large block letters on a giant tablet displayed above a small altar. As in the King James Bible, she wrote Jesus's words in red. We read the scripture aloud over and over and over again every day until the end of the week, when Mrs. Alexander would close the tablet and ask us to recite the scripture by memory. On

Fridays the teachers asked each student to recite the scripture. If you got it right you got an “A” in religion class for the week. At the end of the year, if you could recite all of that year’s scriptures with ten or less “prompts,” you got a trophy. This trophy was presented at the end-of-year ceremony at which all the students stood before their parents and recited the year’s scriptures. We were warned not to lock our knees lest we faint. I always got the trophy, and by the time I finished the sixth grade our upright piano stood as a glittering monument to my powers of memorization.

Mrs. Alexander was far more to me than a memorization instructor. Only in recent years have I come to appreciate the pious teacher’s influence on my life, starting with a pivotal day in August of 1985.

It was the first week of my second year of kindergarten, and I’d been making a disturbance of myself in class. The problem, so it was decided, was that I was bored. My brother, five years older, had taken it upon himself to teach me to read when I was three. Early literacy and probably heavy doses of Sesame Street had put me academically ahead of my five-year-old peers. The school’s solution was to send me to the first-grade classroom, to Mrs. Alexander, for the hour she taught reading. Never mind that sending me to reading class was an odd solution to the problem posed by my being able to read. I don’t remember anything about my first day in the first-grade classroom, except for what happened when the reading lesson was over and Mrs. Alexander attempted to send me back to kindergarten. She stooped toward me and asked me with what sounded like sincerity if I was ready to go back to kindergarten or if I would like to stay in first grade. After a moment’s consideration, I answered that I would rather stay in first grade. That was not the response that Mrs. Alexander was anticipating. She realized in that moment that she could hardly go back on her offer, and after standing there a for a few seconds looking bewildered she said, “Well, I guess you had better go and get your things then.”

And so I marched back down the breezeway toward the kindergarten classroom and rapped on the door with my little five-year-old fist. The teacher, Mrs. Rita, with her long, golden, never-even-trimmed hair, opened the door and put her arm around me to welcome me back to the class. But I pulled away from her and explained that I wasn’t staying. I had only come to get my things and was going to the first grade. She must have done that thing that adults do with children sometimes, a feigning of mortal injury that I did not want to be in her classroom anymore, because I remember being filled with remorse and nearly changing my mind about kindergarten just to spare the teacher’s feelings. But, with a mixture of sadness and resolve, I collected my backpack, my lunch box, and the morning’s art project and left the colorful room with its little round table and kinder mats for the far more serious first- and

second-grade classroom, its straight rows of rigid writing desks. When I arrived, Mrs. Alexander seemed once again surprised and I recall her amusement as she showed me which would be my desk.

To that moment, and to Mrs. Alexander's allowing of it, I credit a couple of things. One is a kind of boldness that has had me leaping out of the jaws of safety into the unknown my whole life. And another is a propensity for crashing through what I understand to be imaginary walls. Since that day I've never been much for structure, never felt the need to do things the way everyone else does. It was my first day as a freethinker. And being a freethinker meant not only a rejection of organized religion but a serious doubting of the existence of God.

I was seven years old and in the third grade, a mere three rows back from Mrs. Alexander on my journey to adulthood, the day that, staring out at the American flag, daydreaming as usual, I formed my first real thought on the existence of God. The God I was contemplating was the bearded man in the sky watching my every move, the one who created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and who might, if you were very good and you prayed really really hard, grant you a miracle. My thought on this God went something like this:

What if there really is a God?

Nah.

That was it, "nah." My seven-year-old expression of atheism. The idea that there was a God was the more comforting, the safer, thought, yes. But, having chosen intellectualism over safety at five years old, there was no going back.

Whether or not I was buying what Mrs. Alexander was saying about God, Jesus, Heaven, Hell, or Sin, I was exposed to teachings on Christianity every school day of my life until the age of eleven and that, inevitably, has had some effect. That first thought on God was not conclusive. Although my original answer to the question "What if there really is a God?" was the profound "nah," I've spent my life cycling through all kinds of answers including *Of course!*, *Of course not!*, *I really hope so*, *Maybe*, *Probably*, and *What exactly do I mean by the word "God?"*

From a young age I sought to reconcile my natural rationalism with the possibility of a higher power, so that *mythos* and *logos* might coexist. In the fourth grade I had a conversation with a girl named Hannah on the subject of evolution. How we knew of the Theory of Evolution I'm not sure, unless we'd been taught the idea in the interest of learning that it was heresy. Having considered this evolution idea, I proposed to her that maybe Creationism and evolution could both be true, that maybe evolution was how God made the world. Hannah adamantly objected, but the idea made perfect sense to me, and it still does.

At the age of thirteen, I entered a year-and-a-half long foray into the Baptist Church. I'd been brought along by a new friend to a youth revival at the Convention Center in Baton Rouge and was seduced by the thrilling production. Back in my hometown, I found myself approaching the alter at Judson Baptist Church to tell the pastor, Brother McConn (of whom I still have fond memories), that I was ready to be "saved." Shortly thereafter I was officially baptized—dressed in a white robe and dunked in a bathtub by Brother McConn in front of the whole church. For a year and a half I was a true believer, attending church every Sunday, praying fervently, and reading the Bible looking for answers. My enthusiasm however sank into disillusion when I realized that Judson Baptist Church was a social club for nice families in which, as a lone teenager, I was more tolerated than welcome. Feeling rejected by the church and outraged at the hypocrisy of Christians, I, in typical adolescent fashion, flung my Bible and Jesus and most of God out of my philosophical window.

After a few years of wavering agnosticism, I read *Life of Pi*, a novel that in the end demands of its agnostic readers to stop fence sitting and pick a side. I chose atheism. But I wasn't really through with the God question. Take a gander at my bookshelf and you'll see a collection of books on God and religion. It was Karen Armstrong and her book *A History of God* that swayed me away from what most people consider true atheism. From her book I formed an entirely new notion: that "God" is the human dream for justice, an ideal state of the world for which we naturally long, that longing separating us from animals. In her conclusion she writes, "If there is no absolute then there is no reason that we should not hate or that war is worse than peace. . . [Religion] makes us aware of our finite nature; we all hope that the injustice of the world will not be the last word." Her argument rang true enough to inspire an intellectual turning point for me.

The effect of my religious education has been more than a spurring of curiosity, more even than the need to contemplate the God question. I've come to realize that most of my philosophy on life and the world has been built on Mrs. Alexander's daily sermons,. Unlike most professed atheists, I possess not only a strong education in Christianity but also a healthy respect for and defensive attitude towards the Christianity I was taught. And I'm tempted to claim that it is my Christian sentiment, more than my atheism or liberal East Coast education, that puts me at such odds with the brand of Christianity that is today so vocal and determined to impress itself on everyone else.

The United Pentecostal Church is considered "extremist," but beyond the enforced modesty for women I did not experience that extremism. What Mrs. Alexander taught me in that little sanctuary, standing humbly with her

hands crossed behind her back, was not that other people are evil and going to Hell, not that being gay is a sin, not that Islam is Satan, not that abortion is murder and it is therefore okay, imperative even, to murder doctors. What she taught me every day was to be as nice a person as possible and have compassion for people. And I can say for her as well as the others who ran that school that they practiced what they preached. It was, after all, a compassionate little school that welcomed kids who were expelled from public schools and tried to help them. They took in kids who needed extra help and gave it to them without segregating them into special classrooms against the will of their parents. You needn't even be Christian to attend. I remember a girl coming to school who had to wear a scarf on her hair. She tried to explain what her religion was but we couldn't understand what she was talking about. I realized later that this girl was probably a Muslim. From CCA I learned tolerance and inclusiveness. When I got into fights I wasn't punished. Instead I was asked to write a letter about what had happened and made to sit down for counseling with the other child. I was taught to listen, apologize, and forgive. I was taught that I was no better nor more deserving than anyone else. I was taught that we are all the same in the eyes of God and not to judge or condemn others. Basically, I was taught to be, in today's political definitions, a Liberal. And despite my non-espousal of institutionalized Christianity, I liked this Jesus fellow. He seemed like a nice guy.

So imagine my confusion at the large groups of people—appearing on television, the internet, and the streets of New Orleans—proclaiming themselves as Christians and behaving in ways thoroughly antithetical to the Christian philosophy I internalized as a child. Mrs. Alexander had failed to convince me that Jesus Christ was my Lord and Savior, but I'd at least learned how Christians were supposed to act according to the New Testament. Telling other people they were going to Hell or believing that God would reward someone with money struck me as absurd postures for people who claimed to follow these teachings. Even my five-year-old self knew it was wrong, very very wrong, to pray for money or—shocking—harm to others. Not only my early education but my intellectual curiosity concerning religion had, seemingly, led me to know quite a bit more about Christianity than people not only hollering to the rafters about living a Christian life but demanding that others do as well.

Another Karen Armstrong book, *Battle for God*, cleared my confusion. I'd been aware that Christianity was divided in doctrine, not only Catholic and Protestant but countless denominations within Protestantism. What I learned, though, is that Protestantism is divided into two major camps. One feature of this division is along the concept of divinity. One camp believes that God is everywhere and that divinity is in the world. These are the love-and-compassion liberals, the ones who care about the poor and do social work, the ones who seek to bring about the

Kingdom of God here on Earth through good works. On the other hand you have the revenge-fantasy fundamentalists, those highly vocal and political activists of the Christian Right, the ones who like to talk about who God hates, and the list is long. They believe that divinity is separate from the world, which is evil and damned. Incidentally, the God-is-everywhere philosophy is the one I was taught at CCA. The United Pentecostal Church is somewhat extreme in its views but not fundamentalist. According to Armstrong, the Christian fundamentalist doctrine holds that concern for the poor and the environment is not only unimportant but *manifestly evil*. I had it in my head that the Bible says man was given the Earth to take care of. But an entire and very large group of so-called Christians can't wait for God to destroy the evil World and take them up to Heaven from which they will, presumably, point and laugh at all the damned and suffering fools who remain below. This vengeful attitude explains a billboard along Highway 26 in Mississippi. I pass it every time I go to visit my grandmother in the strict conservative Christian town of Lucedale, Mississippi. Jesus, nailed to the cross, blood dripping down his face, *glaring*. In huge letters: Consider Your Ways. Quite a contrast with the Jesus of the children's song I used to sing: *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so*. According to that billboard, Jesus may love me, but he is *pissed off* at me. The Jesus of the Christian Right is not the good-natured ancient hippie I'd always imagined but a sword-swinging blood-thirsty thug. This Jesus urges war on entire populations because they are heretics and must be annihilated. This Jesus condones the murder of doctors in his name. This Jesus and the people who dreamed him up scare the crap out of me.

And so I find myself hoping that there really is a God. I don't worry that if there is I will burn in the eternal flames of Hell for not submitting to the doctrine of those who really, really want me to burn in Hell. A rabbi pointed out in a lecture I attended at Boston University that the Bible, even the New Testament, says nothing about an after life. And when I now read with a critical eye the passages Christian apologists point out as evidence to that effect, only the most literal interpretation of what I'm convinced is meant to be poetic language comes close to the contemporary Christian doctrine of Heaven and Hell. Only by picking verses out of context and stringing them together could those verses add up to such a notion. I know there is no bearded man in the sky looking down on me and wagging his finger every time I have pre-marital sex or drink whiskey or say *fuck*. There is no God granting people's prayers for wealth or a football victory or even, for that matter, the recovery of the ill. But in all my liberal would-be Protestantism I'd like to think there is some kind of divine force working against the ideology of hatred, that in the words of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the arc of history really does bend toward justice. And

when—for all my atheism—I find myself desperate enough to say a prayer, my only request is that good might prevail. And of that payer I believe Mrs. Alexander would approve.

Two Tongues: Two People

Turkish breakfast consists of a boiled egg, slices of cucumbers and tomatoes, olives, two kinds of goat cheese, and bread. That breakfast was served to me by the hotel the first morning I awoke to my new life in Istanbul. I felt somewhat like Don Juan the morning he cracked his eyes as a shipwrecked foreigner on a Greek island and was greeted with a breakfast of fish. The famished Don Juan would have had a beefsteak. I would have had fried ham, eggs, and toast. Or at least a bowl of cereal.

I'd been woken just before dawn by the *azan*--the Muslim call to prayer--a wailing chorus that resonated from the loudspeakers of multiple mosques and echoed off the rooftops of the city. *Alaaah. Alah akbar*. The unmistakable sound of a strange land. Breakfast was my first jolt of culture shock, the six months of alternating euphoria, depression, and rage that anyone who's moved to a foreign country is likely familiar with.

I was twenty-four when I moved to Turkey to teach English, setting off abroad, like Don Juan, to distance myself from a life that wasn't working out to my favor. Since graduating from college I'd failed to find myself a meaningful career, wandering from job to job, getting fired more often than not, mainly out of apathy. If patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, English-teaching overseas is the last refuge of the chronically unemployed college graduate. To prepare for this move I borrowed money from my mother and went to San Francisco to get a certification, hoping that the CELTA (Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults) would lend legitimacy to my plan to flee America and my apparent incompetence.

People ask me a couple of things about this adventure when I mention it. The first is *why Turkey?* The answer to that question is vague. Making decisions based on deliberate long-term planning was not how I lived my life. (That probably contributed to my failure to secure an actual career.) As it turned out, there were certain spots around

the globe where an American could hope to make a decent living as an English teacher, and Istanbul was one of them. I happened upon a magazine article written by an English teacher in Istanbul who, by the sound of it, was having a rip-roaring good time. So I applied for a job in Istanbul via the internet, at a reputable-sounding school called English First. And that is how, four months after stumbling upon the idea to teach English in a foreign country, I found myself strapped into an airplane seat, bound for Istanbul on a one-way flight, with just enough money to get me through the first month.

The other question people ask me is: *Do you speak Turkish?* At the time I departed for Istanbul, I'd taught myself a few phrases using a book I picked up a month before at Barnes and Noble. Upon arrival at the Istanbul airport, I uttered a couple of those: *Merhaba* (hello) and *Nasil siniz?* (How are you?). People, to my surprise, not only understood me but replied in this odd language. I'd never heard real live humans speak Turkish. Up to that point I couldn't be certain it was a real language.

You don't need to speak the native language to teach English. In my CELTA course I learned just how English is taught on the progressive front of language acquisition theory. The methods I learned involved adjusting my speech to the level of my students' understanding, a decent ability to draw, and a lot of gesturing and jumping around. A combination of child speak, charades, and Win, Lose, or Draw.¹ Any use of the native language is forbidden; translation is the last refuge of the lazy teacher. I became really good at illustrating with stick figures.

The way I learned Turkish was to plunk myself into the middle of Istanbul and discover the new immigrant's panic at utter linguistic incompetence. Some Americans love to complain about signs and documents being translated into Spanish for the benefit of Latino immigrants, a thing that seems odd to me since the translations affords those immigrants a chance to obey the translation-detractor's admonitions to "*learn English, damn it!*" In Istanbul I was grateful for the signs translated into English, which not only helped me pick up Turkish vocabulary but without which I'd have been screwed.

* * *

In America I had been an intelligent and articulate person, capable of handling all manner of transactions with grace. In Istanbul I became a bumbling, clueless foreigner: *yabanci*.

¹ These new skills proved extremely handy, in my first two weeks in Istanbul, when I had to go to the hardware store in search of a piece of pipe for my washing machine, one that would connect two hoses to one hose receiver. I explained the whole thing by charades, a triumph I considered greater than having explained it in Turkish.

To my fortune, Turks, unlike certain other nationalities that won't be named (the French), are happy to help the lost and linguistically disadvantaged. This I learned in my first week, when some coworkers suggested I meet them at Ortakoy Cami, a pretty little mosque, they told me, perched on the edge of the Bosphorus.

I couldn't tell them I was afraid.

Until I could find an apartment, my school had provided me with a hotel room near Taksim Square. The wide plaza, the center of Istanbul, swarmed with people coming and going from Beyoglu, Istanbul's central shopping district. Street vendors shouted over the din: human chatter mixed with the low whine of car engines, the squeak and hiss of the brakes of busses and a chorus of car horns. Vendors selling bottles of water shouted "Soguk Su! Soguk Su!" (Cold water!) Men hovering over the steam of roasted corn called out "Bir lira bir lira!" (One lira! One lira!) The sellers of lottery tickets yelled "Bu gece bu gece!" (Tonight! Tonight!), their cries mingling with others-- "Buyurun!" and "Taxi, taxi!" Chaotic or not, Taksim was the only place, besides the school where I taught reluctant office workers sent by their employers, that was at least a little familiar.

I couldn't believe no one was going to hold my hand and show me how to get on the bus. I'd lived in major cities and taken city busses before. This was not even my first time in a foreign country. What scared me was the idea of getting on this bus and going some place, by myself, far away from the relative safety of my hotel room, in an enormous city that I did not understand and in which, beyond numbers, I spoke and understood about ten words of the language. I couldn't tell my coworkers that I was scared to take the bus alone. I had not admitted to any of the other teachers at English First, who were seasoned ex-pats, that I was terrified, that I was not certain I could handle what I had impulsively gotten myself into. So I waded into the roar of engines and bus fumes at the stop in Taksim Square, where busses jammed together, and scanned the signs in the windows for the word "Ortakoy."²

Once the bus started moving I realized that the stops were not being announced and that I would have no way of knowing when I had arrived at Ortakoy. My solution was to look around and say, "Ortakoy?" The people around me responded with unintelligible gibberish, which I was able, somehow, to interpret as *No, this is not Ortakoy. It is farther ahead.* And so I waited, peering through the crush of people to see out of the windows, hoping for a clue, hoping to see a pretty mosque on the Bosphorus. But I couldn't see the Bosphorus at all. After about

² I'd moved to Istanbul during a major holiday-Kurban Bayram. Because of that I was confused about a lot of things in Istanbul. For example, I thought people routinely kept cows in the city and slaughtered them in storage sheds. (That's actually illegal.) I also did not understand that on the last day of Bayram, which this was, the busses are free. So when I held out a random amount of money, the way I'd taken to paying for things, it took someone who knew how to say in English "no money" for me to understand. But I was still baffled that the city bus was free.

twenty minutes, I was getting anxious. The bus stopped, a few more people than usual got off, the doors closed and the bus started to move. Again I looked around me and said, “Ortakoy?”

A gasp erupted and the crowd around me shouted “Ortakoy!” and something else to the driver, which at the time I did not understand, but that was probably *Dur! Dur! Inecek var!* Direct translation: Stop! Stop! Getting off exists! The bus driver jammed the brakes. The bus halted and its human contents surged forward. The bus doors opened and the people around me, helpfully, shoved me out the door. Once I had been shoved out of the door of the bus, the smiling Turks waved and bid me good-bye or good luck or something. The bus pulled away, and I stood there, alone, still not seeing the Bosphorus or any mosque. I had memorized the Turkish word for mosque, *cami*, and to anyone I saw I said this word, walking in the first direction they pointed until I found the Ortakoy Cami perched on the shore of the Bosphorus, and there my co-workers, who said, “Hey, you found it,” as if they were surprised.

* * *

I’m an adaptable person. Two months after my arrival, the *azan*, rising over the chatter and tinkling of tea glasses in cafes, had become as familiar to me as the rising of the sun. In the coming months my Turkish improved. I never became truly fluent, but my skill was enough to get me by, enough to get through daily transactions in a way that became second nature to me. Conversing with shopkeepers, waiters, street vendors, and taxi drivers, I gained a fluency that allowed me to be once again charming, even cracking jokes. I moved through my daily life in Istanbul with a fluid confidence, floating through the flow of life of the city in which I was a particle, adding my own voice to the cacophony. My Turkish came confidently enough in routine transactions to fool any fresh foreigner into thinking me fluent.

Along with my new language skills came a new set of cultural expectations and habits that I came to think of as my “Turkishness.” I developed habits such as drinking little cups of tea and shoving people when exiting any form of public transportation. I said no by a click of the tongue and a raising of the eyebrows, and yes by a slow closing of the eyes, that gesture being exclusively feminine. I expressed frustration by saying “oof, ya,” or “Allah! Allah!”, or by jutting one hand in the air and saying, “Bu ne?!” *What’s this?!* I was even able to rattle off, with no hesitation, “Sadici sik gibe orta’da kaldim,” which means *I just sat in the middle like a fuck*. Oddly enough, I found myself speaking English like a Turk, adopting the errors and twisted phrasing I was trying to teach out of my students. I developed the Istanbulu’s reverence for and fascination with the Bosphorus. Even my fashion sense veered towards the modern, feminine Turkish style—skirts and boots, scarves and big earrings. I chose a favorite

football team and a favorite Turkish rock band.³ My friends, other foreigners, sometimes joked with me, “You’re turning into a Turk.” To function in Istanbul meant not only learning the language but inventing a new self, a literal “second nature.” This other identity was my Istanbul self.

There is an expression in Turkish: *Bir dil, bir insan. İki dil: iki insan*. One tongue: one person; two tongues: two people. The meaning is that to speak one language is to be one person, but to speak two languages is to be two people. Language, to the Turkish, is directly linked to identity. According to certain premises of social constructionism, thought is dependent on language. And so to speak like a Turk is to think like a Turk. Not only that, but in another language you are perceived as another person, representing yourself through a whole other set of vocabulary and phrasing. How others perceive us rests largely on not only the words we speak but how we speak them.

In a British novel called *Darkmans*, there is a character named Gaffar Celik, a recent immigrant to England from the Kurkish region of Turkey, around Diyarbakir. Like me and Don Juan, Gaffar has fled his homeland to escape a few personal missteps. The writer, Nicola Barker, notes his English speech in italics, his Kurdish speech and internal thoughts in bold. All of the characters (except one who, improbably, speaks some Kurdish) take Gaffar for kind a comic simpleton, and by reading only his English speech one would get that impression. But through his translated Kurdish, Gaffar is a completely different character from what the others perceive him to be: intelligent, sarcastic, contemptuous.

In Kurdish Gaffar is articulate and witty. In English he is childlike. My experience was similar. On the streets of Istanbul I was a confident immigrant, cute for my funny way of speaking, admired for my ability to speak Turkish at all. But the deeper and less-rehearsed exchanges of my personal relationships revealed the true limitations of my Turkish, reducing me once again to childlike simpleness. And the more I ventured from the cloistered, mono-linguistic world of Istanbul ex-patdom, the more apparent this became.

* * *

My first apartment in the city was in Cihangir, a trendy neighborhood known as home to foreigners, homosexuals, Turkish television actors and, most famously, Nobel Prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk. After my first year in Istanbul, though, I moved into a six-room flat just on the edge of Taksim Square. “Lamartin,” as it was referred to, was a musty-smelling, drafty dive with sagging wood floors, moldy ceilings, and kitchen cabinets that

³ Mainly because they had a song whose refrain I could immediately understand: “Yokl Yok! Yok! That means,

hung precariously from the wall. The place was an asylum of sorts for a revolving stock of poor, fringe-dwelling dreamers of varying nationalities. At the time I lived there we had one American—me—one Italian, one Russian, and two Turks. The flat was linguistically dual, with conversations and individual sentences bobbling back and forth between English and Turkish. My own speech was peppered with Turkish when I had it.

Everyone in the house spoke fluent English except Arzu, the struggling Turkish actress, who spoke only a few words. The other foreigners spoke Turkish. But, despite my efforts to learn, my Turkish, when I attempted it beyond the stock phrases I had mastered, remained bumbling and uncertain. As much as I regretted my lack of fluency in Turkish, Arzu was ashamed of her poor English. And the two of us regretted our language barrier. In matters of household discussion we required a translator. When we were in the same room people had to say things in both English and Turkish. We were weights at either end of the linguistic spectrum of the house, and I felt guilty at times thinking that my English end weighed more heavily.

Despite the language barrier, Arzu and I made efforts at friendship. It was a relationship that strained not only against a language barrier and a cultural barrier but also a tension of distrust between two women co-existing in a high-drama and sometimes sexually-charged social world, a circumstance that rendered our interactions awkward but also mysteriously intimate. A major function of Lamartin was to throw big parties full of foreigners and the most liberated of young Istanbul Turks. Arzu and I were sometimes to be found reclining on her bed amid these late-night wine-drenched revelries, inspiring paphian conjecture on the nature of our relationship. Really, though, all that lay behind the suggestive physicality and wary glances was a sensed kinship struggling to articulate itself, reaching across the divide between her English and my Turkish, forming in that space a private world not really understood by anyone else in the house. It was only inside that space that we knew each other.

On the surface, anyone could see that Arzu was beautiful, her skin a smooth olive and her face sharply angled. She was fire-tempered and lustful, always with some young lover hanging around. She smoked a lot of pot and often seemed unhappy. Beyond those characteristics, much of what I knew of Arzu's character came from second-hand interpretation. I might have had my own opinion, a whole different one, otherwise. I might not even have liked her, or perhaps I would have liked her more. Would there have been more tension between us, or less?

One night she said to me, unexpectedly: "Eugene, he go you house?" We were sitting on her bed, smoking. She fixed me with a sharp gaze that wasn't angry, but pained.

"Does not exist! Does not exist! Does not exist!"

Eugene had been a lover of hers when I still lived in Cihangir. He spoke no Turkish and English with a thick Catalan accent that made him difficult to understand, even to a native speaker. What verbal communication between them could have existed I don't know. But it only could have been like that of Don Juan and the Greek girl Haidee who, . . . "though their speech/ Was broken words, they *thought* a language there—/ And all the burning tongues the Passion teach/ Found in one sigh the best interpreter . . .” All well and good for Juan and Haidee. But for Arzu and Eugene, a lack of common language proved less idyllic. When Arzu came to understand that Eugene the world-wanderer meant to leave Istanbul, she flew into a rage, attacked Eugene violently and locked him in the flat from the inside, tossing the key. As Eugene explained, “I try to talk to her, and I am trying to explain to her, but like this is very difficult because I am saying things to her and I am not knowing if she understand something. And she is just shouting to me in Turkish and throwing the things at me, and I am not understanding nothing. She says to me ‘you stay! you stay!,’ but I cannot stay. She does not understand this. I try to tell her again and again. Why she doesn’t understand this?” Arzu didn’t give up easily. She stalked him, appearing at bars and shouting at him in Turkish. Because Arzu didn’t know where I lived, Eugene hid in my Cihangir apartment. And I’d feared that if she ever learned that she’d shred my face.

“Evet,” I admitted, after a moment. She took a drag from her cigarette and exhaled slowly.

“Okay,” she said, tipping her cigarette in the ashtray. “No problem. Now, Eugene no problem for me. Finish.”

“Tamam.” *Okay.*

“I manyac. You know?” she said, pointing to her head, looking intently at my face. She always looked at me like that--intently.

“Evet. Manyak. Crazy,” I replied.

“Evet. I crazy. Sometime.”

“Ben da,” I said. “Manyakim. Sometimes.” *Me too. I’m crazy. Sometimes.*

And that was the extent of our conversation about it. I assume that had one of us been more nimble in the other’s native tongue, there’d have been more discussion on the subject. But I’m tempted to believe it’s better that there wasn’t.

* * *

In May we threw a party for Arzu's birthday. A few of her friends, street performers from her coastal hometown of Bodrum, had come up to visit. They were all in her room smoking a joint and Arzu had invited me in. No one in the room spoke more than a few words of English. This was a new situation for me. Turks are fascinated with Americans, and having captured one they fixated on me and barraged me with questions. I tried to answer--squirring, blushing, stuttering, scratching my head. They urged me to speak and then giggled at my comical foreignness: my accent, my twisted grammar, my confusion. Were they being mean, or just playful? I wasn't sure. They exchanged comments between them and I couldn't understand. They spoke to each other while looking sideways at me and laughing. It seemed they were testing, to see if I really couldn't understand. I had seen this before. My students would do this to me sometimes. By then I'd left the job teaching reluctant office workers and found one I liked more, teaching the twenty-somethings of the Istanbul middle-class. The upper-level students behaved themselves, but in the lower-level courses the men (full-grown, believe it or not) slouched in their chairs and challenged my authority, trying to impress each other and the (petulant) girls by ridiculing me, muttering things they thought I would not understand. Using Turkish in class was forbidden, but sometimes I would glare at them, narrow my eyes and say, sharply, "Anladim, yani." *I understood, you know.* Sometimes this would shut them up, even make them sit up straighter in their chairs. Sometimes it only made them laugh harder, and I had no choice but to exude an indignant huff and continue the lesson.

Arzu's friends were making sport of me. "Yeter," she said. *Enough.* She touched the joint to her lips, exhaled a thick plume of smoke and passed it to me.

That night I met Cagdas (pronounced Cha-dash). While the others played at mocking my Turkish, Cagdas sat in the corner, bouncing a juggling ball and occasionally glancing up at me. He approached me later that night and said, "You Turkish good."

We met again a few days later at a rooftop party, a birthday party for the Russian roommate of Lamartin. We managed, between his broken English and my broken Turkish, to make conversation. There was a lot of head tapping and finger snapping involved. Cagdas's honey-colored hair and fat nose suggested an ethnic origin other than Turk, as did his urgent desire to sail across the Aegean to Greece. He wore glasses, a thick beard, and a red and white scarf tied around his head. He asked if I would go to Bodrum, where he lived. Bodrum is a resort town on the Aegean Sea, so a visit in the summer, when I'd finished my teaching contract, was likely.

"Evet. Gelerim," I said. *Yes. I'll come.*

“Neden?”

“Bilmiyorum. Belki iki ay sonra.” *I don’t know. Maybe two months.*

“Two months?”

I nodded.

“Tamam. You me phone.” He took his mobile phone from his pocket. “I number give.”

“Okay.”

“You me phone?” he asked, pinkie and thumb extended against his head.

“Evet.” I nodded. “I’ll call.”

“Call,” he repeated. “You call.”

A month and a half later I was staying at a British hostel in Bodrum. Cagdas and I exchanged text messages, and he came to pick me up by motorbike. “We go motorbike. Turgutries. Okay?” he said.

“Tamam.” I said. “Cok guzel. Giteriz.” *Very good. Let’s go.* It was late afternoon but still hot. The sun bounced blindingly off the whitewashed stucco of the buildings. Lacking an extra helmet, he gave me his. I put his helmet on my head, tightened the chinstrap, and swung my leg over the seat of the bike, holding tentatively to his ribcage. He kicked the starter.

“Hazir mi?”

“Hazirim.” *I’m ready.*

He pulled out into the street, passing the bar full of British tourists. Soon we were leaving the town and traveling the high coast road, winding along the undulations of the rocky coast with the fragrance of oleander and the sea wafting into our nostrils, the azure blue Aegean Sea to our left, the islands of Greece just barely visible in the distance. We stopped at a store to buy beer and cigarettes. Near sunset, we arrived at the harbor in Turgutries, where we boarded a small sailing yacht and descended into the cabin. Cagdas made a meager living as a performer, mostly at children’s birthday parties--juggling, walking on stilts, doing magic tricks. He also worked as a boat hand. This was his boss’s boat, but I understood he slept here most of the time.

“Here,” he said, pointing at the floor, “This boat. My house. You stay my boat tonight. Beer. Smoke. Okay?”

“Bu gece, kalim.” *Tonight, I will stay here,* I replied.

“Iki insan. Beer. Smoke. Good.”

“Çok güzel.” *Very good.* Two people. Beer. Smoke. On a boat. A good plan if I’d ever heard one.

This was my first time to be nowhere near an English speaker, relying almost solely on my tenuous grasp of Turkish. No translator. Cagdas and I, as we had sensed when we met, had a lot to say to each other. Down in the cabin of that boat we smoked pot and cigarettes and drank tall cans of Efes Bira all night. Our birthdays, we discovered, were three days apart, in June. We were both Gemini. *İkizler.* Twins.

He pointed to his head “Kafa?”

“Yes, head,” I said. “Kafa.”

“Head,” he repeated. “My head, iki insan var.” In his head there were two people. “Anladimisin?”

“Evet. Anladim,” I replied; *I understood.* “Ben da, ben da,” I said. *Me, too.*

His wore a sleeveless t-shirt revealing a thick tan shoulder with a tattoo--a grimacing clown face with a beard shadow and a bulbous red nose. Below that, on his bicep, a jester squatted on a stump. Cagdas was a clown, *palyoço*, but he was also *korsan*, a pirate, he said. He pointed to his chest and said “korsan,” then squeezed one eye shut and said “arrgh.”

“Anladim!” I shouted. *I understood.* “Pirate!”

“Pirate.” he repeated. “I am pirate.”

It is well known that a little alcohol is good for the foreign language skills. Marijuana, however, is not so helpful, and our ability to communicate verbally was a bit hindered. However, what we lost in recall ability we made up for in a shedding of inhibition and an eagerness to communicate. I being an English teacher and he a clown, we were both well-practiced in the art of mime. We filled the night with a discussion of our philosophies on life through a kind of bartering of English and Turkish, supported by a lively game of charades. It was a great way to have a conversation. One might imagine that this is how language was invented in the first place.

Humans use language to draw each other into our mental worlds and to build our identities. And I do believe that the proverb is correct, that the identity I built with Turkish wasn’t the same as the one I built with English. Norman Mailer believed⁴ that the very sounds of certain consonants have associative qualities, and different languages evoke different reactions in the senses. As verbal articulations were first assigned to things in the world (I like to think that the first sentence in the world was “Tiger! Run like hell!”), the humans assigning them had different ideas of those things. Direct translations don’t tell everything. The English word for *palyocho* is “clown.”

⁴ Michael Lennon and Norman Mailer, *On God: An Uncommon Conversation.*

But Cagdas was not a clown. The words may ostensibly signify the same thing, but the idea of a *palyocho* is, on a visceral level, a different idea from that of a clown. The word *clown* connotes absurdity or cheerful foolishness. But a *palyocho* is a dark figure, a clever societal misfit. In English I was a teacher, but in Turkish I was *ogretman*. An *ogretman* is a position of much more status than a teacher would be in America. The word itself has a different sound, one that sounds like a declaration and that brightens faces in response. The word *teacher* falls off humbly at the end, as if it is bowing. *Ogretman* climbs three steps from back to the throat to the top of the mouth, as if mounting steps. It sounds like it is standing up.

And then some things have no translation. *Gecmis olsun*, that Turkish phrase used when someone is ill or having a rough time or dating someone bad for them, would be translated as “may it pass.” But “may it pass” could never deliver the sing-song sympathetic resonance as *gecmis olsun*, a phrase whose spirit and intention can be subtly altered through the tones of its sing-songiness.

That night on the boat Cagdas and I came to know each other in two languages—two people stepping into each other’s linguistic worlds. The next day, however, when Cagdas took me to his mother’s house, he stepped again out of my world and I remained in his, far out to sea in Turkish culture with no island of the English-speaking one in sight. I was a guest for lunch, a social moment in which conversation is crucial. In the white afternoon sun, we ate lentil soup, *borek*, and stuffed grape leaves. And the conversation, in Turkish, passed as naturally over my tongue as my lunch. Out on the Turkish sea I came to the island of another self—not an American speaking Turkish, but more like an Istanbulu speaking Turkish, thinking like a Turk, eating like a Turk, feeling as at home in Turkey as I had anywhere.

Three years after I left Turkey and returned to the United States, I made a trip back to visit Istanbul. My Istanbulu self, just as any Istanbulu would, had been traumatized by the separation, the distance from the Bosphorus, the lack of tiny cups of tea. As I stepped off the bus into the din of Taksim Square, the American girl who had first arrived there trembled again in terror, but the Istanbulu awoke, breathed in the smell of bus fumes, roasting meat, and cologne and thought: “Praise Allah, eviyim geldim.” *I’m home*.

Fear and Luck in the Balkans

Less than four hours out of Belgrade, I awoke to the clamor of Serbians boarding the train. Alone in the second-class compartment, I'd been stretched across the seat getting badly needed sleep and was hoping to remain that way all the way to Sophia, Bulgaria. It was noon. The car was warm and bright, but I could've slept there for ten hours, easily. I sat up and blinked at the door of the compartment. A tall woman with bleached-blond hair poked her head inside. From behind her over-sized pink sunglasses she gave me a once over then turned and called down the hallway, her hand beckoning someone into the compartment. With a heavy sigh, I stuffed my dirty gray backpack, which I'd been using as a pillow, into the bin above my head.

I'd left Istanbul, where I'd been living and teaching English, two months previous on a train bound for Bucharest and had been as far as Bosnia by train, bus, and hitch-hiking. I'd been to a Romanian wedding and spent a week as the houseguest of the groom's mother. I'd hiked for two days through the Transylvanian Alps with a couple of Germans and I'd traveled around Romania with a group of Argentinean boys, with whom I'd run screaming through the streets drunk on red wine. I'd stayed on a vineyard in Hungary, where I cooked over a fire and washed my clothes in tubs with water from a rain cistern. While on the vineyard I got pink-eye, but, with the help of a nice lady from the village, I'd scammed the Hungarian social medical system into treating me for free. I'd seen Iggy and the Stooges and Radiohead at a music festival on an island in the middle of the Danube in Budapest. In Croatia, I'd camped uncomfortably on a rocky beach and illegally in the national forest. I'd watched a film at the Sarajevo Film Festival and visited the corner where a Serb had assassinated the Archduke of Austria and ignited a world war. And now I was on my way home, first to Istanbul and then on a plane back to the United States, from which I had been

gone for almost two years. Right now, to go home was all I wanted to do, and the trip to Istanbul was a long one-- two and a half days by train and bus.

The overnight train from Budapest to Belgrade had been so packed that at first I thought I would suffocate. Conditions improved when we opened the windows. I spent the first five hours of the ten-hour journey without a seat in a compartment, crammed in the corridor with a bunch of Slovaks headed south, sitting on my overburdened canvas book bag to protect the seat of my pants from the grime of the train floor. Despite prison-camp conditions, the ride was cheerful. I'd bought three bottles of Hungarian beer at the train station, which helped. The guy wedged next to me on his way to Albania spoke fluent English, and we passed the time talking religion and politics in a jovial atmosphere of shared cigarettes and the passing of beer bottles. When a seat opened up in the compartment, the Slovakian boys in their grace offered it to me first, and I slept with my head on someone's shoulder all the way to Belgrade.

In Belgrade I didn't venture beyond the train station. I had time to take a look around the city and grab another overnight train, but I was tired. And anyway I'd seen enough Eastern European cities by then to take a good guess at what that one would look like. Also, Serbia made me uneasy. Or, rather, Serbians made me uneasy. This had a lot to do with the week I'd spent traveling in Bosnia.

I'd fallen in love with Sarajevo, a city of domes where the water was sweet and the people gracious. A city where Christians, Jews, and Muslims, Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians, had lived peacefully together for hundreds of years until a Serbian named Slobodan Milosevic started trouble. I'd witnessed the destruction wrought by Milosevic's army on that city and others in Bosnia. The warmth and hospitality of the Bosnians, who are Muslim, reminded me of the Turks I'd been living among in Istanbul. Turks, however, are often possessed of nationalism that is annoyingly bereft of humor. I found the Bosnians more light-hearted. In Mostar, I saw a t-shirt that read "I'm Muslim. Don't panic." When talking about the recent war, they didn't come off as bitter, but their accounts did not flatter the Serbians.

And so, my opinion of Serbians, based on biased information and likely unfair, was that they were provincial, brutish trouble-makers. It occurred to me that they might not be so fond of Americans, either. We did bomb Belgrade. I felt they had it coming, too, because, as I understood it, they remained unapologetic about the three-year siege of Sarajevo. So, as soon as I arrived in Belgrade, I took my American Passport and my Bosnian

sympathies and found the nearest train out of there, praying to the travel gods for an empty second-class compartment where I could stretch out and get some sleep. Until that moment, I had my wish.

The compartment was soon filled with Serbian women stuffing bags into the overhead bins and under the seats. The bleach-blonde was the only woman in the compartment making any effort at her appearance. She wore a tight-fitting pink tank top, a lot of makeup, and big hoop earrings and was significantly more tan and thin than the others, who were mostly older women with dark, short-cropped hair and flabby, pale bodies stuffed into loose blouses and t-shirts. One younger girl had a bright, pretty face, but she didn't wear any make-up or jewelry, her dark hair hung limply and her clothes were as unflattering as those of her companions. As for me, the cargo shorts and t-shirt I'd been traveling in for two days were dirty when I put them on. I probably smelled bad and, having been convinced by a crazy friend earlier that summer that shampoo was unnecessary, I hadn't washed my hair for three months.

I pulled my journal out of my book bag and started writing, trying to look as absorbed in that as possible, hoping to be ignored. I would not have such luck. Upon settling into their seats, all of the women in the compartment immediately pulled out packs of cigarettes from their bags, all of which I saw to contain numerous cartons, and smoked with such furious abandon, one cigarette right after the other, that I broke into my journal reflections on leaving Hungary to write, "These ladies sure like cigarettes." The other ladies chatted among themselves, but the woman with the bleach-blonde hair, sitting directly across from me, crossed her long legs in stonewashed jeans, pushed her big pink sunglasses, some kind of cheap Versace knock-offs with fake rhinestones twinkling in the plastic, to the top of her head, and stared at me. She spoke English.

"Where are you from?" she asked, jiggling her pink platform wedge in the space between us.

For the first time in my life, I was tempted to answer that question dishonestly. At that time, during the Bush administration, a lot of Americans traveling abroad claimed to be Canadian. This denial of being American seemed to me not only cowardly but counter-productive. I realized that a lot of people resented my country, and I understood why, but I was proud to present myself as an example of an American people could like, one who was sympathetic to and not fearful of the rest of the world. In Serbia, however, I was not only fearful but not particularly sympathetic. I assessed the likelihood of anything going amiss and also the likelihood that she wouldn't notice my distinctively blue passport when we crossed the border.

"America," I answered.

“Where are you going?”

“Sophia.”

“What are you doing there?”

“Just traveling.”

“You are lucky.”

I considered this statement. I was an American girl traveling alone through the Balkans in a second-class train compartment full of Serbians. The fifty American dollars in my wallet was all I had to my name. I was, at that time, technically, homeless. This woman did not know that, but she was right. I nodded in agreement. She continued to stare at me.

“I am going to Sophia, too.”

“Huh.” I paused. I did not want to make conversation. I also, for diplomatic reasons, did not want to be rude. “Why?”

“Business,” she replied.

I nodded, completely satisfied with this answer and incurious about what kind of business. She told me anyway.

“I’m going to sell cigarettes.”

“Huh,” I said. I assumed this woman was not a sanctioned representative of a tobacco distributor. She was, obviously, a smuggler. I offered a terse smile. Although I’d been known to smoke a few cigarettes myself, I did not have any. I’d thought of buying a pack in Belgrade but hadn’t wanted to buy any more Serbian money after I paid for the train, and cigarettes, I knew, would be cheaper in Sophia. Knowing that made me wonder what profit there could be in this smuggling of them from Serbia to Bulgaria, but I wasn’t about to question this lady about black market economics in the Balkans. I wanted to know as little as possible about what she was up to. I did consider bumming a cigarette off of her but reckoned that the second-hand smoke drifting in layered swirls around the compartment was enough.

The woman continued to question me, which was making me nervous. I explained that I had been living in Istanbul, and that’s where I was going. She asked the usual questions. How old was I? What did I do in Istanbul? Was I married? Did I have any children?

The train rolled through the treeless plains of the Serbian countryside, which were the same as the treeless plains of the Bulgarian countryside, with which I was familiar and not at all excited about seeing again. The flat green terrain is great for farming but wanting in entertainment, the main feature being the farming villages that are cute--stone houses with red-tiled roofs--but that are far apart and don't last long. I like my scenery mountainous and dramatic. I like to feel there is a danger that I will go over the side of a cliff and that there will be a brief news report: "One American was killed yesterday in a train accident in Romania....." I assume that most Americans hear that sort of report and conclude that traveling in such places is not safe. Maybe it's not. Maybe I don't want it to be. Maybe I hear those sorts of reports and there's a small part of me that is jealous of the American who died in a mini-bus accident in Uzbekistan.

I'd been to Sophia before, and I didn't like it. It had that utilitarian industrial feel of a city developed under communist rule, aesthetics and charm being bourgeois and all. Nothing but square concrete block buildings and unhappy people. From Sophia I was looking at another ten hours on a bus to Istanbul, passing on the way through the old Roman burg of Plov Div, a place I did like. The normal procedure for English teachers living in Istanbul was to cross the border every three months to buy a new tourist visa. Plov Div, eight hours away by bus, was a nice escape from the crowds, noise, and chaos of Istanbul. I'd spent a few visa-run weekends on holiday there, sitting in cafes, enjoying the availability of pork and cheap liquor and basking in the clean, orderly tranquility of Christendom, watching throngs of uniformly gorgeous young Bulgarian women wearing short skirts and high heels pass through the square. Then, on the way home, I'd stop by the duty-free shop at the border and buy a fifth of Jack Daniel's whiskey as a treat for my friends in Istanbul, where import taxes made most liquor prohibitively expensive.

The bus trip would be boring, but I was vaguely looking forward to what would be my first taste of familiarity in weeks. When we passed the border between Bulgaria and Turkey there would be Bulgarian women, older ones to whom time had not been kind, trying to take across the border to Turkey more than their quota of liquor and cigarettes, which is two fifths and two cartons, respectively. They would ask me to put things in my bag for them, a bottle of liquor or a carton of cigarettes, and I would, because I'd done it before with the assurance of the bus driver that it was both acceptable and customary to do so. I liked helping the Bulgarian women smuggle their booze and cigarettes, (if it could really be called smuggling, since it was done in plain sight and probably legal-ish enough), because it made me feel like a friendly, experienced foreigner who knew the ropes and wasn't afraid to

help some desperate women make a few bucks. Maybe it made me the kind of American they could like: one who was sympathetic and not fearful.

When the bleach-blonde woman stopped questioning me, I went back to my journal. "I really don't know what's up with these cigarette ladies," I wrote. "We're nearing the border and they're taping cartons together. Anyway." I ignored the ladies and concentrated on recounting the ordeal of searching for a place to sleep in Banja Luca, Bosnia, a city which, much like Sophia, lacked anything charming to see, when the light changed, prompting me to look up and discover that we were passing through a canyon. I perked up at this sight, momentarily transported back to the dramatic mountain landscapes of Bosnia, which had won my traveler's heart with their nail-gnawing switchback turns through misty canyons that plunged into icy crayon-blue rivers ("One American was killed in a bus accident in Bosnia yesterday..."). In a very short moment we were out of the canyon and back to the monotonous green vistas that were the only scenery all the way to Istanbul.

I saw that the cigarette ladies were now tucking cartons of cigarettes under their clothes and into their socks under their pant legs. The bleach-blonde woman pulled a bulky sweater over her head and loaded it with cartons. I watched with a mixture of amusement and trepidation, waiting for the question I knew was coming. She tapped me on the knee and I raised my eyebrows in acknowledgement, the look on my face saying, "Can I help you?"

"Would you like to take some cigarettes?" she asked.

"No, thank you," I answered, summoning the gracious manner of a cocktail party guest turning down a truffle.

"You can take two," she said with a scowl. I opened my mouth then shut it again quickly and picked up my pen. She glared at me, clearly disgruntled with my refusal. I couldn't be sure, you see, that those were cigarettes in those boxes. I'd heard stories about people being asked to take cartons of cigarettes across the border and those cartons turning out to contain heroin instead, and though I usually considered those stories to be the lore of paranoid Americans, in this case I decided that a little American paranoia would be best. I was alone, and a patsy I was not. Sorry, lady.

The train slowed as we approached the border crossing. The cigarette ladies settled into their seats and continued their relentless cigarette smoking. When we stopped, Serbian border guards boarded the train and collected passports. I handed over my blue American passport, trying to look as friendly and stupid as possible. I tried, with all my might, to make my face say, "No, really, I like Serbians. I've never even heard of the Balkan wars.

And if I had heard of such a thing I would surely be on your side.” The guards searched the ladies’ bags and confiscated a few cartons that one of the ladies was hiding. Her face drooped. She shook her head and whimpered in protest. I wondered what kind of financial setback that would mean for her. The guards whipped out screwdrivers and removed panels from the ceiling of the compartment, where they found nothing. In about twenty minutes the train started moving again, on to the Bulgarian border.

That’s when things got a little crazy.

The ladies pulled all the cartons of cigarettes out of their clothes and I sensed a stirring throughout the car. A slight commotion. A young man entered our compartment with a screwdriver and looked at the ceiling. I understood that I was in the way, so I moved into the hallway, eager to oblige. I wouldn’t help these ladies with their smuggling, but I certainly didn’t mean to be in the way. Out in the hallway I saw that all the other people in my car were standing up and moving in and out of the compartments. A young man sprinted toward my compartment, pulled his t-shirt over his head and handed it to one of the ladies. Another lady boosted him into the opening made by the removed ceiling panel. Cartons of cigarettes were appearing from everywhere, and people were handing them up to the young man, the top half of whose body was now in the ceiling. This was happening, I realized, in every other compartment in the car. I wondered if it was happening in the whole train.

In ten minutes we arrived at the Bulgarian border. Again I handed over my blue American passport, more comfortable with the Bulgarians than the Serbians, at least with their border guards. This time I tried with all my might to make my face say, “I don’t know *shit*.”

If I was wondering why the Bulgarians weren’t checking the ceiling, I soon got my answer when the youngest of the ladies in my compartment handed over a wad of cash to one of the guards, with whom she chatted in such a way that I understood this was not their first meeting. The bleach-blond woman, who had now removed her bulky sweater, jutting her head out of the window and called to one of the guards outside of the train. They chatted for a moment and she waved at a couple of the other guards, flirting. The air of camaraderie was palpable and for a moment I felt part of it, like I was in on something, like a friendly, experienced foreigner who knew the ropes and was completely comfortable in the world of international smuggling. *My, but aren’t we having fun*, I thought. I don’t know if it was because I was glad to be back in Bulgaria, but I was no longer fearful. I did not feel like a paranoid American. I smiled at the ladies in my compartment, wanting them to like me.

When the train started rolling again I moved into the hallway to clear the way for the cigarettes to come down from the ceiling. I tried to count how many cartons there were. At least a hundred. The cigarette ladies stuffed cartons of cigarettes into canvas bags. At this point I was impressed. I was, I believe, proud of them. This wasn't business. This was adventure. For these ladies, quite possibly, this was survival.

In another hour, the train arrived in Sophia. I hauled my backpack from the overhead rack and slung my book-laden sack over my shoulder. Sophia was somewhere I'd been before. I knew how to get from the train station to the bus station, and I was looking forward to the ten-hour bus ride on an air-conditioned coach to Istanbul. In three days, I'd be boarding a plane back to the United States of America. My life in the First World awaited me: a life in which I did not know war and in which I did not need to bribe anyone or climb into the ceilings of trains to make my living. On the platform, the horizontal light of the late sun made silhouettes of the other passengers streaming out of the cars with their bags, and I imagined that the whole train was filled with cigarettes and cigarette smugglers. I looked back to see the bleached-blond woman stepping out of the train, her sunglasses obscuring half her face and the handles of a bulging canvas bag in each hand. She paused, looked left and right, then disappeared into the sun.

Astride Lofty Wheels

“Captain” Hill’s feet throbbed, and his head was growing light. He slumped beside a gaping hearth, along with his two young companions. The fire roared and snapped, the heat slowly cracking through the dampness in their wool stockings. If any of them were entertaining ideas of going home, all remained silent on such thoughts. This was only the first day. They had traveled just fifty miles, tramping along the railroad tracks most of the way. Their legs ached. The fire hissed. Thunder crashed. Outside the cabin, rain pelted the brown sand beach. Flashes of lightning lit up the black sky over the Gulf of Mexico and the coastal hamlet of Waveland, Mississippi.

At nine o’clock that evening, the owner of the cabin, Mr. T. Beck had, to his surprise, opened his door to find standing there, panting and muddy, three athletic-looking but bedraggled men wearing muddy shoes and soggy knee britches, water dripping from the brims of their caps.⁵ The gentleman might have taken the three for vagrants or criminals of some kind had it not been for their patrician grooming and the fact that each stood clutching a recently-shiny but now completely mud-caked symbol of his social privilege—a high-mount bicycle. These were men, understood Mr. Beck, whose misfortunes were recent. Actually, although he had not been expecting to greet the three of them at his front door that evening, he’d heard of them and immediately realized who they must be.⁶ He had gladly extended his hospitality, inviting them in and busying his son preparing them a supper. Being now at least not starving, the men were huddled around the fire recounting the tales of their day to their hosts when suddenly, A.M. Hill, prominent businessman and accomplished athlete, fainted for the first time in his thirty-eight years of life.⁷

⁵ New Orleans *Daily Picayune*. July 23, 1886.”By Bicycle to Boston. A Full Account of the Famous Trip of the New Orleans Wheelmen.” 8.

⁶ *L.A.W. Bulletin Vol 3*. October 29, 1886. Page 450.

⁷ *Daily Picayune*. July 23, 1886.”By Bicycle to Boston. A Full Account of the Famous Trip of the New Orleans Wheelmen.” 8.

That day, Easter Sunday 1886, had started out in New Orleans as a cloudy but mild spring morning. Shortly after sunrise services, a crowd of curious citizens and well wishers gathered outside the jewelry store at the corner of St. Charles Avenue and the famously-broad shopping boulevard of Canal Street. The crowd had increased to at least a hundred by 5:30 am, according to a local reporter, when the owner of the store, A.M. Hill, emerged from inside dressed in a neat riding outfit of brown shirt, corduroy knee britches, and brown wool stockings, the official uniform of the League of American Wheelmen. Soon after, Charlie Fairchild, Hill's twenty-one-year-old employee, arrived beaming with excitement, wearing a blue flannel riding suit, his pistol pocket stuffed with a pocketbook, a toothbrush, a comb, and a bottle of cologne. From his shirt pocket dangled a watch. As the minutes ticked to the appointed hour, the two men, along with the crowd, began to grow anxious. They were waiting for a third man, Harry Fairfax, and were beginning to think he wouldn't show.⁸

Outside the door of Hill's jewelry store, under the sweeping iron-work balcony at the edge of the French Quarter, leaned two bicycles: Hill's 51-inch Columbia Roadster, built in Boston, and Fairchild's 53-inch Rudge Light Roadster, imported from Coventry, England--each the acme of bicycle technology of the time. The machines were outfitted with all the latest road gear. To the handlebars of each was strapped a traveling bag--a bundle of oiled cloth fifteen by eight inches, weighing about twelve pounds, containing all they hoped they'd need for the next month: an extra suit of underwear, a pair of short pants, silk stockings and light shoes for the evenings, a rubber rain coat, an old bed sheet to be torn up for bandages and handkerchiefs, needles and thread, and toiletries including a toothbrush, a comb, a bottle of Pond's Extract, and plenty of bandaging plaster, of which they would be needing more than they suspected.⁹

The two bicycles each consisted of one big front wheel over four feet in diameter, trailed by a much smaller one. A rotary pedal crank was fixed to the axel of the front wheel, with the handle bars attached by a rod running directly vertical from the crank. From the handle bars, the frame, or "backbone," arched steeply down to the fork of the relatively tiny back wheel. The tires of the roadsters were skinny, seven-eighths to three-quarters of an inch. Attached to the hollow metal rims, or "felloes," with cement, the solid rubber tires were meant to be replaceable by the rider, if necessary. Bolted to the frame, just behind the handlebars and at the eleven o'clock position on the arch of the large wheel, was a small leather saddle supported by a spring.¹⁰ Standing beside the machine, each man would

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *League of American Wheelmen Bulletin* Vol 3. October 29, 1886. 450.

¹⁰ *Rudge 1887 Catalog*. Tallbike.com.

have met the saddle at about shoulder height. A slang term for the bicycle at the time was “shadow steed,” and getting one going was a bit like mounting a moving horse. Near the bottom of the frame was attached an adjustable step. The rider would run along beside the wheel with one hand on the saddle and one on the handle bars and then, in one swift motion, mount the step, swing his other leg over the saddle, and—so he hoped—get his feet onto the pedals in time to crank the wheel and keep the machine in motion before it fell over.

Despite the learning curve and agility involved in mounting and dismounting, this design for the bicycle was for many years considered to be the most practical, and in fact the only truly viable, design for a two-wheeled vehicle of human-powered locomotion. The high-mount design, often referred to as the “penny farthing” (due to the smaller wheel’s resemblance to a small coin next to the larger one), was developed and became popular in Europe in the 1870s. The previously popular design had been the “boneshaker.” Developed as the first pedal-crank two-wheeler in the 1860s, the bonekshaker had wheels of roughly equal size, with the pedal crank attached directly to the front wheel. The rattling nature of the vehicle’s iron frame on its wooden wheels earned its nickname. This bicycle became a fad for the rich when it was first marketed, but the general public soon found it too impractical and awkward to ride and abandoned it, leaving cycling to a small group of dedicated enthusiasts. In the 1870s new technology in wheel design, including hollow rims and thin metal spokes, allowed bicycle-makers to increase the size of the front wheels while retaining strength.¹¹ The increased size of the wheel meant greater torque, resulting in faster speeds. Later came the innovations of lighter frames and rubber tires. With these technological improvements, bicycles could attain clips rivaling that of a trotting horse. Competitions being held between horses and wheelmen demonstrated as much to the public. Provided road conditions were smooth enough, an experienced rider could sail along with casual pleasure for miles.

In the spring of 1876, an Englishman named David Stanton showed up in New York with two of the new machines, Keen’s Eclipse models, in tow. After a few weeks of traveling around giving demonstrations, Stanton returned to England with plenty of orders, despite the high markup for shipping and tariffs.¹² In 1878, Albert Pope secured patents and began manufacturing the machines in Boston under the name Columbia, becoming the first mass manufacturer of high-mount bicycles in the United States. After the short-lived boneshaker craze of the 1860s, Americans had forgotten all about the bicycle. But without import costs these new, far-better bicycles became cheap

¹¹ David Herlihy, *Bicycle: The History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 159.

¹² *Ibid*, 181.

enough to quickly increase in popularity in the American market.¹³ By the 1880s, the United States was experiencing its second bicycle craze.

All major cities and a good many smaller ones saw the formation of bicycle clubs. These social organizations put on group rides for members as well as races and exhibitions for the delight of the public. They held road races, track races, trick-riding shows, and, as mentioned, races between cyclists and horses. Itinerant bicyclists drew crowds at arenas in cities all over the country. The bicycle, alongside horse racing and baseball, rose as mass entertainment. By 1883 most large cities had tracks for bicycle racing at their fair grounds.¹⁴ Newspapers reported not only the details of local races but the records and feats of cyclists from around the country. Cycling champions, such as L.D. Munger, S.G. Whittaker, and A.A. McCurdy, were household names in the way that the professional football quarterbacks are now. Women riders such as Louise Armaindo and Elsa von Blumen also made names for themselves, racing not only against each other but against male riders and horses.¹⁵

Cycling enthusiasts of the 1880s regarded the bicycle as more than just an amusement. In the late nineteenth century, American society had become urbanized and industrialized. The spans of the cities were becoming too wide to be walkable. The invention of mass transit in the form of streetcars offered a solution, allowing for the further expansion of the city and the building of residential suburbs farther and farther from the city center. But the bicycle, so some believed, offered a better alternative to mass transit, a means of independent travel far cheaper than the enormous expense of a horse and carriage. Besides allowing the rider to quickly traverse expanding cities, the bicycle offered a means of escaping the crowds, noise, and filth for the solace of the country. The bicycle clubs that popped up like mushrooms in nearly every city in America in the early 1880s sought not only mutual enjoyment of their hobby but to promote bicycling to the general public as practical, everyday transportation.

So far, however, the general public was far from coming around to that idea. One reason was expense. At between \$100 and \$200—in today's dollars, between \$2500 and \$5,000--the price of bicycles limited their enjoyment to the upper classes. They also, despite being much easier to handle than the old boneshakers, still required a moderate dose of athleticism to ride, and they were regarded as dangerous. Injury from bicycling was so common that doctors took out advertisements to warn the public of the danger. In New Orleans, bicycle-racing

¹³ Ibid, 192.

¹⁴ *Wheeling Register*. June 13, 1886.

¹⁵ Herlihy, page 205.

programs carried advertisements for Dr. Tichenor's, a new brand of antiseptic being marketed for the treatment of cuts and lesions. Newspapers of the day published this poem:

"Two trains collided one dreadful day,
Two trains with people filled,
And for many yards around the earth
Was strewn with hurt and killed.
They drew one body from the wreck,
So gashed twas hard to tell
If in that mangled form of clay
A spark of life did dwell.
"How do you feel? They gently asked,
When he was snug in bed.
"Oh I'm all right; I don't mind this;
I'm a bicycle rider," he said.¹⁶

A *New York Times* article admitted of bicycle riding that there was "some danger and difficulty, but only enough to add zest to what would otherwise be tame." On the difficulty of learning, the *Times* assured its readers, "No man under 60 is so old or so clumsy, barring only cripples, that he cannot learn in a month."¹⁷ The principal drawback to the bicycle in its dominant design was the danger of taking a "header." Should a rider strike too large of an obstacle with his wheel, he was prone to pitching straight over the handle bars and meeting the ground head first. "Pride cometh before a fall but a fall cometh after contact with a large sized obstruction," quipped a sporting magazine of the era.¹⁸ On a downhill coast, in which the vehicles were difficult to stop even with the "spoon brakes" fitted to the front wheel, experienced riders considered it much safer to drape one's legs over the handle bars so as to have a better chance of landing right-side-up should the wheel tip forward. "The danger," hedged the *Times* on this issue, "is in inverse ratio to the rider's caution. If he coasts down a strange hill he may get pitched into a ditch and break a bone or two. . . . But it would not, therefore, be fair to call the pastime dangerous."¹⁹

In the late 1880s, after long efforts by manufacturers to design a less hazardous machine, the "safety" bicycle hit American markets. With two wheels of the same size and chain-driven rear crank, the new safeties were easier to ride and far less dangerous than the "ordinaries."²⁰ However, into the 1890s many riders clung to their high-mount bicycles as superior in design. To ride as high a wheel as possible was not only a matter of gaining speed but one of pride and machismo as well as vantage point. Riding high over the crowd one could not only feel superior but see

¹⁶ J.J. McCarthy, *Yankee Blade*. collected in Louisiana Cycling Club Spokes Scrapbook.(Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans), 23.

¹⁷ *New York Times*. August 5, 1883.

¹⁸ Louisiana Cycling Club Spokes Scrapbook, 11.

¹⁹ *New York Times*. August 5, 1883.

farther. And the attitude of many riders was that the risk in cycling was all part of the caché. To make cycling more safe, so some of them thought, was to take the fun out of it.

As an expensive and dangerous hobby, bicycling in these formative years was mainly a pursuit of the athletic young men of the upper classes. When Pope Manufacturing Company began selling high mounts 1879, twenty-five hundred bicycles were sold in the United States, one going to the New Orleans jeweler, A.M. Hill. An amateur athlete and member of the Young Men's Gymnastic Club, Hill soon became the pioneer wheelman of the South. When he started cycling in 1879, there were only two other bicycles in the whole state of Louisiana.²¹ Two years later, Hill organized New Orleans' first bicycle club, with twenty members, at a meeting at his jewelry store at St. Charles and Commercial Alley.²² This was the business Hill had started when he moved to New Orleans at the age of 19, in 1866.

Hill had grown up in Pennsylvania and been educated at the early public schools there known as "common schools." He'd then gone on to Iron City Commercial College in Pittsburgh, the first business school in the United States, graduating at 15. After working for a few years for his brother in Louisville, Kentucky, the nineteen-year-old Hill moved to New Orleans and began a business making and repairing gold pens for the businessmen of downtown New Orleans. He lived above his shop at No. 86 St. Charles. Hill gradually expanded his business as a jeweler, and in 1882 bought out the jewelry store at Canal Street and St. Charles Avenue. He would eventually build it into one of the most successful jewelry businesses in the South.²³

At the first meeting of the New Orleans Bicycle Club in 1881, Hill was, predictably, elected Captain.²⁴ (Although A.M. Hill served as Captain of the NOBC for only the first few years, he continued to be referred to as "Captain Hill" ever after.) The NOBC soon contracted to have a square of Canal Street paved with asphalt—some of the first in the city-- to give the club a practice ground.²⁵ A man of pioneering mind, Hill was intent on promoting bicycling as not only an enjoyable sport but a means of practical transportation. As stated in the club's charter, the object of the club was both mutual enjoyment among cyclists and the promotion of the bicycle as "a practicable and

²⁰ Ibid, 225.

²¹ Louisiana Cycling Club Spokes Scrapbook, 30.

²² *Daily Picayune*. April 30, 1881. "A Bicycle Club."

²³ Chamber of Commerce Book. Page 131.

²⁴ *Daily Picayune*. April 30, 1881.

²⁵ Ibid., July 16, 1881.

enjoyable aid to locomotion by the general public.”²⁶ In service to this aim the club made regular runs around the city and to the resorts on the outskirts, wearing uniforms and riding together in coordinated rows with enforced procedures for passing wagons and carriages on the street. Captain Hill’s NOBC, laboring against stigmas that had plagued the bicycle from its invention, sought to represent bicycling as a dignified occupation that could greatly serve the public weal.

In publicizing their activities, the NOBC often got help from its friends at the *Daily Picayune*. In 1881, the first year of the club, the *Picayune* reported a ride that Captain Hill made from downtown New Orleans, up Canal Street, and along Bayou St. John out to Spanish Fort, the resort area situated on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. Marveling that he accomplished the six-mile ride in thirty-two minutes, the paper remarked, “This almost appears impossible, taking into consideration the state of the roads to Bayou Bridge.”²⁷ Doing what others deemed impossible was the nature of Captain Hill. With a receding hairline, swooping forehead and beaked nose, he was small in stature but made of grand ambition. By 1885, having made for himself both fortune and reputation as a businessman and active citizen, Hill was looking to make a name for himself as an adventurer. At the November meeting of the NOBC, he joined others in proposing a bicycle tour from New Orleans all the way to Boston, the site of the 1886 national meeting of the League of American Wheelmen.²⁸

Inspiration for this proposal came from the famous bicycle tours being reported in newspapers at the time. Thomas Stevens was somewhere in Asia, having nearly completed his pioneering ride around the world. *Outing*, a popular sporting magazine, sponsored the trip and periodically published his travel accounts. His famous tales would later be published in the two-volume *Around the World on a Bicycle*. That year also, Karl Kron (Lyman Hotchkiss Bagg)²⁹ was touring the United States, gathering material for his book *Ten Thousand Miles on a Bicycle*, an amalgam of road guide, handbook, encyclopedia, and personal travel narrative that includes an eighteen-page biography of his dog, Curl, to whom the book is dedicated.³⁰ Such famous tours and publications stood as proof,

²⁶ *Charter, By-Laws and Road Rules of the N.O. Bicycle Club*. New Orleans: Hunter and Ginslinger, Printers, 48 Camp St. 1886. New Orleans Public Library Louisiana Division. Rare Vertical Files. Charters, No. 63

²⁷ *Daily Picayune*. “To Spanish Fort on a Bicycle.” May 3, 1881.

²⁸ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

²⁹ Emil Rosenblatt, “Introduction.” In *Ten Thousand Miles on a Bicycle*. (reprint, New York: Emil Rosenblatt, 1982)

³⁰ Kron, “The Best of Bull-Dogs.” In *Ten Thousand Miles on a Bicycle* (1887; reprint, New York: Emil Rosenblatt, 1982), 407-425. Kron explains in a footnote that he had submitted this biography to a dozen magazines, and that it had been unanimously rejected. He offers a copy of the biography, along with the heliotype of the dog that appears in the front matter of the book, for twenty-five cents.

according to Captain Hill, that “the cycle is a pleasant, safe, and economical method of journey.”³¹ To travel by bicycle meant an entirely new kind of adventure, offering the rider far more independence than boat or rail but greater speed than walking. Besides being slow, to travel by foot carried a social stigma. According to Karl Kron, in the opening chapter of his book, “the very name of ‘tramp’ has come to carry with it the notion of something disreputable or dangerous.” But, “when the solitary wayfarer glides through the country on top of a bicycle . . . the whilom tramp is transformed into a personage of consequence and attractiveness. . . . All creatures who ever walked have wished that they might fly; and here is a flesh-and-blood man who can really hitch wings to his feet.”³² So long as the roads were in cooperation, cycling was a means of transportation that was in its self a pleasure. To travel on foot was low and unfortunate; to travel by bicycle was noble and romantic. The bicycle traveler was able at once to break free from the confines of the crowd and establish himself as someone to be admired by it.

At the time he proposed the tour from New Orleans to Boston, Captain Hill had recently had a taste of long-distance bicycle travel. That July, after representing the Louisiana Division of the League of American Wheelmen as Chief Consul at the national meeting in Buffalo, New York, he had been the only southern participant in a northern long-distance touring club called the “Big Four” (so called because most of the members were from Chicago, Boston, Buffalo, and New York), a group of a hundred cyclists who rode from Buffalo to New York City in eleven days.³³ Cyclists were trying out the roads all over the northern part of the country, but so far no one had made a long-distance attempt across the South. Hill and Charlie Fairchild, who was at that time Captain of the NOBC, wrote letters to post-masters and well-known cyclists in cities along the planned route, inquiring as to distances and road conditions. From the responses they received, which turned out to be significantly on the rosy side of estimation, they determined that the trip would be more than possible. Originally, seven members of the club agreed to the tour. However, by the time of departure, only three remained game, the others bowing out over business and “other concerns,” possibly the fear that such a trip would prove miserably arduous if possible at all. Many of the New Orleans public were certain they’d never make it as far as Mobile, let alone Boston.³⁴

Despite the demonstrations of the long-distance bicycle tourists of the time, to travel America by bicycle in the 1880s was a daunting proposition, and it would have been even riding a modern-day mountain bike. To ride one of those high-mount models even now, with paved roads and reliable maps, would be a feat worth noting. But, in the

³¹ Ibid.

³² Karl Kron, *Ten Thousand Miles on a Bicycle*, 1.

³³ Ibid., June 26, 1885.

1880s, when bicycles required decently solid ground to be useable at all, roads outside of the Northeast were notoriously un-solid. This was true especially in the South, where railroads were only newly coming to replace waterways as primary inter-city transportation. The movement of goods and people between cities was done either by boat or rail. Wagon roads between cities and towns either did not exist or were barely passable. Still, these three bicycle enthusiasts, led by Captain Hill, were out to prove to New Orleanians of little faith that it was “as easy to go to Boston by wheel as any other way.”³⁵ Adding to the challenge, they resolved to make the trip of fifteen hundred miles in thirty days.

The riders advertised the kick off of their great tour as exactly 6 o’clock on the morning of April 25. Outside of Hill’s jewelry store on Canal Street, that hour was drawing swiftly near with no sign of Harry Fairfax. Charlie Fairchild and Captain Hill had good reason to fear he wouldn’t show for the adventure after all. Hill, though nearly forty, was an all-around sportsman and in fit condition. He’d been preparing for this ride for some months, making long tours in the vicinity of the city and working out at the gym. He was no stranger to long distance cycling, as he reminded the crowd by appearing that morning wearing a big peaked straw hat, one side turned up and a cluster of feathers at the top, an emblem of the “Big Four” touring club.³⁶ Charlie Fairchild was a young athlete, twenty-three years old, and had reportedly been getting some riding in as well. Still, in Hill’s estimation he didn’t really seem in shape for the feat when the morning came. But Harry Fairfax, a reporter for the *Daily Item*, was only nineteen and had been riding for just three months.³⁷ His ambition was of the blue-blood variety. He was the son of John Wheeler Fairfax, a well-known financial broker and part owner of the newspaper, the *Daily Item*, Harry wrote for. On his mother’s side, Harry was a descendent of the family of George Washington.³⁸ Whether despite or because of the luxury of his social milieu, Harry Fairfax had a mind to hit the road. Just as the clock was striking six o’clock, the “handsome boy-rider,” as the paper called him, appeared pushing his new Rudge Light Roadster up Canal Street, accompanied by his parents and a party of young women.³⁹

The assembled three now headed down the broad avenue of Canal Street towards the Mississippi River, where they turned left and proceeded up Decatur Street toward Elysian Fields Avenue. Wishing to avoid riding on the

³⁴ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

³⁵ *Sporting Life*, “A Long Journey.” Vol 7, April 28, 1886.

(http://www.la84foundation.org/SportsLibrary/SportingLife/1886/VOL_07_NO_03/SL0703006.pdf)

³⁶ *Daily Picayune*. April 26, 1886. “By Bicycle. Three Daring Orlenians Start on a Ride to Boston.”

³⁷ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

³⁸ *New York Times*. June 8, 1934.

³⁹ *Daily Picayune*. April 26, 1886. “By Bicycle. Three Daring Orlenians Start on a Ride to Boston.”

cobble stones of the French Quarter, the oldest part of the city, the cyclists walked their bicycles along Decatur Street through the market district. To their right were the wharfs along the Mississippi River, where steamships docked, packed with produce to be sold in the markets, and riverboats waited, full of cotton to be bailed in the cotton presses and shipped across the Atlantic to Liverpool. Followed by a crowd of fifty admirers, and gazed upon by throngs of longshoremen and market merchants and their wives and children crowding the street in that early morning, the gentlemen pushed their wheels alongside the heaps of produce and coffee stands and dry-goods stalls presided over by the mostly-Italian merchants, who came out to cheer the heroes of the hour, waving their dark arms in the air or extending them to offer the lucky adventurers lunches to take along. At Washington Square, on the very edge of town, Captain Hill, Charlie Fairchild, and Harry Fairfax paused for another round of hand-shaking and well-wishing, basking in the envy of their friends and offering such reassurances as they could as to their safety, even as a curious and doubtful crowd of onlookers wagered against the likelihood of their return.⁴⁰

At 6:30 am, Captain Hill threw his leg over the saddle of his wheel and led the party out of Washington Square and up Elysian Fields Avenue where the train tracks of the L & N Railroad branched off into the swamp.⁴¹ They were accompanied that far by a reporter from the *Daily Picayune*, which, later that summer, would publish a full account of the adventure taken from Captain Hill's journal. There the three cyclists shook hands again with the riders of the city who'd come to escort them that far and after the final, reluctant good-byes, they were off in earnest, riding the tracks, leaving the city behind them, and hoping to make it as far as Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, fifty miles hence, that day. They planned to reach Mobile, Alabama, one hundred fifty miles east along the Gulf shore, in three days.⁴² No one had as yet attempted to bicycle even that far.

Following the railroad tracks was a key strategy of travel for bicycle tourists of the time. It is often noted that the bicyclists of the late 19th Century literally paved the way for the rise of the automobile by advocating for the improvement of urban and inter-city roads. But in the 1880s, it was the railroad that made riding long distances across the United States possible for cyclists. When roads were too poor or non-existent, bicycle travelers took advantage of the railroad tracks, either riding the paths along-side them when they existed or bumping along the ties themselves. Out West, Thomas Stevens had ridden the railroad tracks through the snow-covered peaks of the Rocky Mountains, taking advantage of the snow sheds over the tracks of the Central Pacific Railway to make a passage

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

through the mountains no one thought possible. To ride the tracks, however, sometimes proved hazardous--when the train itself appeared, that is. Thomas Stevens recounts his encounter with a train as he was making his way through the dark, smoky tunnels at the summit of the Sierras, in which “groping one's way with a bicycle over the rough surface is anything but pleasant going . . .

But there is nothing so bad, it seems, but that it can't get a great deal worse; and before getting far, I hear an approaching train and forthwith proceed to occupy as small an amount of space as possible against the side, while three laboriously puffing engines, tugging a long, heavy freight train up the steep grade, go past. These three puffing, smoke-emitting monsters fill every nook and corner of the tunnel with dense smoke, which creates a darkness by the side of which the natural darkness of the tunnel is daylight in comparison. Here is a darkness that can be felt; I have to grope my way forward, inch by inch; afraid to set my foot down until I have felt the place, for fear of blundering into a culvert; at the same time never knowing whether there is room, just where I am, to get out the way of a train.⁴³

As the riders from New Orleans made their way out of the city at the start of their journey, they found that so long as the ties were well-ballasted they were able to get along fairly well by riding across them. Only a few miles out of town, however, they came to loosely ballasted tracks in no shape for riding, and the ride quickly devolved into a walking ordeal of many hours. Poor Harry, the rider of only three months, was the first to meet with misfortune by taking two terrible “headers” almost right away. Only fifteen miles out, at Michaud, the party had to stop as Harry was “in a state of collapse.” With thirty minutes rest and two glasses of milk he was revived. Hill, if he hadn't before, now had very serious doubts about the inexperienced traveler's prospects for making it much farther, but Harry insisted on continuing. On they pushed, conceding—due to the condition of the ties and absence of any path along the tracks--to walk most of the time. When they reached the point that Gentilly Road paralleled the tracks they attempted to ride it but found the conditions of the rural wagon road hardly recommended it over the cross ties.⁴⁴

Leaving the farms and old sugar plantations of Gentilly Ridge, they entered their second stretch of swamp, “where cypress trees tower aloft straight as an arrow, supporting their dome of dark green foliage, looped and festooned with gray Spanish moss.”⁴⁵ The air was dank and heavy, and in the dark pools of water alligators lurked amid “the hairy trunks of the palmetto.” Past the swamp the land opened up into expanses of marsh grass

⁴² *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

⁴³ Thomas Stevens. *Around the World on a Bicycle - Volume 1 From San Francisco to Teheran* (C. Scribner's Sons, 1889) Chapter I, Kindle Edition.

⁴⁴ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

⁴⁵ *L.A.W. Bulletin Vol 3*. October 29, 1886. 450.

crisscrossed with bayous and splotted with lagoons, “where rafts of lotus leaves and lillies float lazily.”⁴⁶ With the first five and a half hours of the journey passed mostly in walking, they reached Chef Menteur, twenty miles from New Orleans. They were starving. At a restaurant there they gobbled down the first of many meals the quantity of which would astound both themselves and those who provided them along the way. Captain Hill ate four fish, the bruised-up and nearly outdone Harry ate six, and Charlie ate twelve. In addition to the nearly two-dozen fish, the travelers put down a good bit of ham, bread, butter, and coffee, as well as a bottle of beer each. Their solid meal put them back in good spirits and they set off again under gray skies, determined to make it to Bay St. Louis, another thirty miles away, that night.⁴⁷

Several hours later, they came to a town called English Lookout, an island once used as a staging point by the British in the War of 1812, now a fishing resort.⁴⁸ Hoping for supper, they found only bread and coffee. Having traveled forty miles, walking across the trellis-work of the railroad through swamps and marshes, they took a short rest before continuing on. As the light of day grew dim, dark clouds rolled in, the air turned cold, and a heavy rain began to blow in on the stiff winds. They pulled their rubber coats from their packs but found them no match for the wind-driven showers, and their jackets, knee britches, and stockings were soon soaked and heavy. For the next three hours they stumbled along the railroad tracks, in such darkness that they could not see the tracks at all, falling repeatedly headlong into the ditch.⁴⁹ Only by the sound of their voices and the flashes of lightning could they find each other. Their bellies were empty, their clothes soaked, and their feet sore. They began to doubt they would reach Bay St. Louis that night. Spotting an abandoned wood house near the tracks, they talked about trying to camp there, giving up hope of warmth and food and settling for shelter and rest until the light of morning. But then, in a flash of lightning, Harry thought he could make out a group of houses in the distance. It was Waveland. Finding the shell road that led to the little neighborhood on the beach, the travelers pedaled swiftly toward what would be the heaven-sent hospitality of Mr. T. Beck, his dry cabin, his hot supper, his roaring fire.

Captain Hill’s faint was caused by no more than pure exhaustion. He revived quickly, but the three travelers were soon sound asleep in bed. The next morning their host roused them from bed at nine o’clock. They rose stiff and aching from their beds, the sun already well up and precious time ticking away. The long sleep had done little for their strained muscles and nothing at all to help their mangled feet. To the stinging, bleeding blisters they applied

⁴⁶ *L.A.W Bulletin*, Vol 3 October 29, 1886. 450

⁴⁷ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

⁴⁸ *L.A.W Bulletin*, Vol 3 October 29, 1886 Page 450

salve and plaster. They were barely able to pull on their shoes for the swelling. Finally they sat down to a weary breakfast, and no one spoke of turning back for New Orleans.⁵⁰

When time came to mount up again on their wheels, the cyclists were subject to a crowd gathered to get a look at the novel sight. The soreness of their bodies and painful condition of their feet hindered them, but they managed to look more spry than they felt. They had fallen only three miles short of their goal of Bay St. Louis the night before. That morning they enjoyed a “magnificent spin” over the shell road, that particular kind of road surfacing being a favorite of cyclists, next to the beloved but rare asphalt. As the battered travelers cruised passed the elegant coastal cottages and fruit orchards of what was then a resort town (they might have gotten there by train from New Orleans in an hour, as many did at that time of year) their spirits lifted.⁵¹ They must have experienced that brief euphoria of the suffering traveler when, after some exhausting ordeal, things begin to go well again and you remember why it was that you left home. This was the kind of traveling they had set out to do. They planned to make it to Mobile the next day where they looked forward to being greeted by the local wheelmen of that city who, as their friends back home, were no doubt seething with envy and admiration. The nineteen-year-old Harry, the one no one thought could make the trip, must have sailed along with a little self-satisfied smile playing on his face as he thought about all he’d tell the girls when he got back home. Perhaps they’d only had bad luck the first day, getting out of the swamp surrounding New Orleans. But the roads ahead would not be kind, and neither would the weather.

Reaching Bay St. Louis, on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and the edge of the Bay of St. Louis, the cyclists would have to cross the water over the railroad bridge, which was two and a half miles long. The bridge was not meant for pedestrian traffic, but the bridge keeper gave no objection to their crossing. As they would with many other long bridge crossings, they inquired with the bridge keeper regarding the timetable of the trains to be sure not to meet one, since there would be no where to go to get out of the way. They would also, if they could not see the other side of the bridge and were uncertain about when a train might come, lay their ears to the steel of the track, believing they would be able to hear a train coming from several miles away. To get across the bridge they had to step along the ties, which were six inches apart, while holding their bicycles by the handle bars and the steps near the bottom of the frame, rolling the large wheel along the ties. By this method they made it across in one hour and five minutes. Each man rolled about fifty pounds of gear along in this awkward way, stepping between cross ties

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

with aching muscles and tender feet. Still, after the misery of the previous evening, the task seemed relatively easy. They managed to make it across the bridge before the rain again came down in torrents. They spent the rest of the day first getting lost in a swamp looking for a shell road on the spurious direction of a local, then trekking on foot along the coast through what turned out to be not so much a shell road as a stretch of mud graced with the occasional shell all the way to a hotel in Mississippi City, where they stopped for supper and bed.⁵²

Telegrams had been sent ahead to newspapers in cities all along the way announcing the tour. Arriving in Biloxi on the third day of their trip, the travelers were for the first time greeted by a crowd that had been anticipating them. The townspeople presented them with bouquets of flowers which the riders, with some regret, fired off into the bay before crossing the bridge. It was on that bridge that the cyclists discovered the deficiency in their method of putting ear to track to determine whether a train was coming. As the engine of the L&N came thundering toward them and the ties shuddered under their feet, the three rather alarmed men contemplated the potential merits of a swim. Instead, they each scrambled for a telegraph pole, spaced two hundred feet apart along the track, “leaned his wheel against it, and then hugged for dear life.”⁵³

By this third day all three of them wanted badly to go home. Rather than enjoying hours of cycling bliss, they found they had to walk most of the time and “every step taken was positive torture.”⁵⁴ They might have turned back if they’d known how little conditions would improve. To add to the misery of inadequate roads, an unusually wet spring would not only drench them regularly but had swelled the creeks and rivers. When there were no bridges, and often there were not, the travelers caught all hell in crossing the bloated streams. Often the men would ford creeks stripped naked to the waist and holding their wheels and clothes above their heads. At other times the water was too high for that. Charlie, being elected the best swimmer, was sent out to test the depths of the rushing waters. At times they were forced to wait for locals passing by with boats, horses, or steers, and prevail upon them to help them cross.

As miserable as they were, turning back was not a discussion. Having boasted in advance to not only their friends and the city of New Orleans but to newspapers in cities all over the country, they “did not dare,” as Hill put it. They had, he lamented, “given out that it was as easy to go to Boston by wheel as any other way!”⁵⁵ All of their friends and, at their beseeching, the whole world of cycling had their eyes on them. Pride cometh before a fall, indeed, and to save their pride there were no number of falls that would not be endured. Had they gone home they

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

would never have lived down the failure, they feared, all the more because they wouldn't be able to claim that it was simply not possible to cross the South by bicycle. That was because there was another rider out there not only proving the feat possible but all the while cheekily predicting they themselves couldn't manage it.

Fred E. Van Meerbeeke, a cyclist from New York, was at that very moment crossing the U.S. from sea to shining sea—New York to San Francisco—not by the proven northern route but by way of New Orleans. In the late morning of their fourth day, Hill and friends crossed paths with this young wheelman, who had been on the road now for forty-five days.⁵⁶ They met him just west of Mobile, in Grand Bay, Alabama. The previous day, the day of the close call with the train on the bridge, they had traveled only thirty-four miles, thirty of that by walking. Harry had sprained his ankle, and Charlie had taken a header, injuring his hip. Captain Hill's feet were raw with blisters from heel to toe. By the time the three met Van Meerbeke, each was distinguishing his self by what Hill called "his own peculiar and individual limp."⁵⁷

Van Meerbeke was small but tough, referred to repeatedly in the papers as "plucky." He was only twenty years old and weighed 135 pounds the day he left New York.⁵⁸ He'd wagered he could make the whole trip, about 4,000 miles, in 150 days.⁵⁹ So far he'd suffered a delay of twelve days on account of the unusual rain but had not been discouraged from his goal.⁶⁰ Having already come the way they were going, Van Meerbeke scoffed at their intention to make it Boston in only another 26 days, assuring them they'd be lucky to get there in 55. Van Meerbeke, though smaller than Captain Hill, was riding a 54-inch wheel, three sizes larger than Hill's and one size larger than those of the other two. On full extension his toe barely reached the pedal. Hill reckoned the wheel was much too large for him, and also that he was carrying too much baggage. They wondered that he was able to manage so much equipment along the tough southern roads. After calculating his average speed of travel, the three from New Orleans reached a conclusion: "We think he walked."⁶¹

Van Meerbeke, whom the *Daily Picayune* described as "the plucky little New York bicyclist," reached New Orleans that Saturday, three days later.⁶² He was reported to have traveled from New York to New Orleans in forty-

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ *The Cycle*. Vol. 1 No. 25. Sept 24, 1886. 429.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ *Daily Picayune*. "Bicycle to Boston." July 23, 1886.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² *Daily Picayune*. "By Bicycle. Van Meerbeke On His Travels." May 18, 1886.

seven days, covering 1,430 miles—walking, he said, only sixteen.⁶³ In New Orleans he took a rest, remaining for fifteen days in the company of the wheelmen of the city before setting off to cross the Cajun country of southwest Louisiana into Texas and the Southwest.⁶⁴ While Van Meerbeke was predicting they would not reach Boston in thirty days, Hill and friends predicted that if Van Meerbeke made it to San Francisco alive it would only be because he allowed himself so much time.⁶⁵ In fact he did reach San Francisco that September, very much alive and with over a month to spare. The *San Francisco Chronicle* described him as “a frank, manly, and withal a modest young man.”⁶⁶

On the night of their fourth day of travel the limping, soggy cyclists from New Orleans reached Mobile, having traveled the one hundred sixty miles from New Orleans mostly on foot, trudging thirty-six of their forty-one miles that day. But they held out hope for better roads to come. From Mobile their route was to turn north, away from the swampy coast toward Columbus, Georgia, where cycling had taken hold as a thriving sport. While cycling flourished in cities all over the North, the sport enjoyed significant popularity in the South in only a handful of cities, including major scenes in Columbus, New Orleans, and St. Louis (considered then as part of the South). But southern cycling was on the rise. In 1884, the New Orleans printers E.W. Hunter and Charles Genslinger, cyclists and members of the NOBC, had begun publishing *Bicycle South*. By 1886, the magazine claimed 1800 subscribers.⁶⁷ Frank Munger, a famous cyclist making his way around the country that year to promote cycling, had reported to the *Picayune* in New Orleans that in St. Louis the bicycle had become a conventional means of transportation. “There are men in St. Louis who boast of not having worn any but knee britches in months.”⁶⁸ Thanks to the efforts of the newly formed Columbus Bicycle Club, that Georgia city had a rapidly growing cycling scene and a new half-mile bicycle track with a grandstand that could hold twenty-five hundred people.⁶⁹ That Spring, as members of the New Orleans club were on their way to the national League meet in Boston, the Columbus club was planning a multi-day regional meet for July that was all the talk of the cycling world of the South.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ *Daily Picayune*. May 5, 1886.

⁶⁵ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

⁶⁶ *San Francisco Chronicle* via *New York Times*. Sept 20, 1886.

⁶⁷ Kron, *Ten Thousand Miles*, 670.

⁶⁸ *Daily Picayune*. January 15, 1886. “The Wheel. A Champion Cyclist in Town.”

⁶⁹ *Columbus Daily Enquirer*. April 16, 1886. “A Bicycle Club Organized.”; *L.A.W. Bulletin*. November 5, 1886.

The hopeful travelers were looking for better roads as they left Mobile, but it turned out that after all the downpours, the roads as well as a good deal of the L&N Railroad were under water, the land between Mobile and their next destination point of Evergreen being “now almost one vast lake.”⁷⁰ So, after cleaning and overhauling their wheels, they took a train. That night, after the regular routine of a bath and supper, Hill telegraphed back to the *Daily Picayune*, “Unprecedented rains and impassable roads have made wheeling and walking impossible. We arrived by train and go by wheel to Greenville tomorrow. All is well.”⁷¹ The cyclists started their journey the next morning again filled with optimism fueled by hopeful reports on road conditions.⁷² The good roads, however, only lasted for a few miles out of town. Soon they found rough ground, sculpted into gullies by the heavy rains. The land was cut by frequent streams, and they hadn’t made it twelve miles before having to ford three of them naked to the waist. Reaching the Sepulga River, they sent Charlie out to test its depths. He hadn’t waded out ten feet before the water was over his head. Not wanting to turn back and thereby lose time, the travelers attempted to find their way through the woods to the railroad tracks and became terribly lost, slogging through the sticky mud and fearing themselves permanently lost. They were rescued by a “friendly colored man,” who, as Hill reported, “was influenced by the sight of a silver dollar” to lead them out of their quandary and to the railroad tracks, which they rode four miles to Garland, stopping there to eat. That evening they reached Greenville, Alabama, and were there met and entertained by the only wheelman in town.⁷³

Their route continued north from there, taking them one-hundred fifty miles through farm country to Columbus. It was a day of mirth for any traveler prepared to regard the surprises of the road with levity, as they were. The hard red clay of the road out of Greenville seemed promising at first and allowed them several miles of good riding. But they soon found their wheels sunk in soft sand beds and had to walk again, pushing their bicycles through the cloying turf. Once they reached the forest of Georgia pines, parts of the road became ride-able, the fallen needles forming a brittle but ride-able natural pavement. However, the ground tended to go unexpectedly soft, making for some amusing headers in which “the sand would melt under us, and down to Mother Earth we would gently go.”⁷⁴ Passing a church out in the country, they caused the entire congregation of black country farmers to pour out of the

⁷⁰ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

⁷¹ *Daily Picayune*. “By Bicycle. The Boston Tourists in Alabama.” April 30, 1886.

⁷² *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

⁷³ *Ibid*.

⁷⁴ *L.A.W. Bulletin*. Vol. 3. November 5, 1886. 470.

chapel and run behind them, pointing with astonishment at the seemingly alate trio of white gentlemen zooming up the road on their bizarre contraptions.

Dinner that afternoon came at the hospitality of a farm family, and these urban men found themselves pleased enough with the “peculiar” meal set before them that Captain Hill was moved to make a note of the menu: cold mustard leaf greens, cold salt side meat, corn bread baked in ashes, blackberry jam, stewed peaches, apple and peach pie, butter milk, and coffee.⁷⁵ Having found that nothing fortifies digestion like cycling through the country, they all ate plenty. Their hosts advised them to stay overnight, on account of a swollen creek not far up the road. But feeling full and optimistic from their big country meal, they decided to push on. Only two and a half miles out of town, they came to the swollen creek and found that all the optimism in the world wouldn’t get them safely across the deep, rushing water.⁷⁶

Having asked around in the village after lunch, they knew that teams of oxen and horses had forded the creek earlier that day.⁷⁷ So, they took a rest, patiently soaking up the sylvan surroundings, listening to the gush and gurgle of the water and hoping for a lift. Finally, along came a “good-natured” farmer on his way back from the market. His wagon, drawn by a couple of young steers, was loaded down, but he agreed to carry one of the them across on his wagon on the condition that if the wagon got stuck the rider would jump out and help push. Captain Hill took the deal. Once Hill had arranged himself and his machine among bags of flour and meal, they started across, and sure enough the wagon bed was soon under water and not moving, the noses of the steers just out of the water. Hill, honoring the agreement, jumped out into the creek and helped the farmer push.⁷⁸ The other two eventually crossed in horse buggies.⁷⁹

By the time they’d all made it across the creek it was after seven o’clock, so they found boarding at a farm house in the pine woods. Their hosts were three brothers and two wives, all of them living together in the same house and raising cotton, corn, and hogs for their livelihood. Captain Hill was taken aback by the leanness of their condition, commenting that “their prospects of a life of drudgery, delving in the soil for a mere existence were not hopeful.”⁸⁰ For amenities they had only a tin wash bowl on a bench, “and candles were unknown.” The supper they offered their guests was a mean country meal of salt meat, corn bread, and molasses. The one luxury in sight, a

⁷⁵ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

⁷⁶ *L.A.W. Bulletin*. Vol. 3. November 5, 1886. 470.

⁷⁷ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*.

⁷⁹ *L.A.W. Bulletin*. Vol. 3. November 5, 1886. 470.

feather bed, they turned over to their guests, three of the family sleeping instead on the bare boards. "Their hospitality," wrote Hill, "was generosity itself." After supper, they all sat and talked by the fire. Picturing them together, the three wealthy gentlemen from New Orleans and this little family of hard-scrabble country farmers, it is difficult to imagine what they talked about. Each group must have been equally nonplussed. "We shall never forget these people,"⁸¹ remarked Hill.

In the morning the cyclists set out again to push their bicycles through the "horrible, unrideable sand."⁸² By eleven o'clock they were so exhausted that they gave up and stretched out in the grass under the shade of a large, spreading oak and fell asleep in the mid-day heat. They awoke to find a local staring gape-mouthed at them and their machines. At that point they hired a farmer to haul them into the town of Troy. It was there that they were met by a cyclist from Columbus who'd come out to escort them as far as Atlanta.—the much-admired Mr. Tom Ingram, president of the Columbus Cycling Club.⁸³

Tom was the son of a prominent judge, one whom, when he died a few years into the next decade, was said to never have missed a day in court in fifty years. He had a "commanding presence" and was "remarkably active for his age."⁸⁴ Tom seems to have taken much of his character from his father. Standing at five feet ten and weighing one hundred forty pounds, the lanky twenty-three-year-old was bursting with energy and charisma. Having been cycling that country for three years, he was an expert. In May of 1884, after riding for a year, he entered his first race, the Georgia state championship, and won handily. Since then he'd won every race he entered. When *Bicycle South* started publishing profiles of southern riders, they chose Tom to write about first, calling him "a tireless and enthusiastic rider." Expostulating on his hospitality and popularity, they claimed that everyone who'd ever met him considered him a valued friend.⁸⁵ The first day with Tom along brought more sand and more difficult walking, but having such an affable companion along cheered the boys from New Orleans anyway, and they were happy to make forty-five miles.⁸⁶

The last day's stretch stretch to Columbus brought a significant rally. Tom, knowing every inch of those roads by heart, led the party, speeding along with ease, making quick work of the sand hills. Hill remarked, though, that he

⁸⁰ *L.A.W. Bulletin*. Vol. 3. November 5, 1886. 470.

⁸¹ *L.A.W. Bulletin*. Vol. 3. November 5, 1886. 470.

⁸² *L.A.W. Bulletin*. Vol. 3. November 5, 1886. 470.

⁸³ *Daily Picayune*. "Bicycle to Boston." July 23, 1886.

⁸⁴ *The Macon Telegraph*. December 6, 1893. "Judge Porter Ingram."

⁸⁵ *Bicycle South*. Qtd. in *Columbus Daily Enquirer*. September 22, 1886. "Prominent Southern Cyclists. A Brief Biographical Sketch of a Young Columbus Wheelman."

was not one to “scorch,” a slang term for racing or trying to outride other cyclists. Rather, he led the tourists at “just the proper pace,” and that day they made their record distance so far, chalking up sixty miles. In Columbus they would stay the night at Tom’s home. He gave his guests a chance to wash up and take a brief rest before insisting on a bicycle tour of the town and its suburbs. “We got back to town after dark,” wrote Hill, “having ridden about 20 miles ‘just for fun’ and to give Tom *enough*, as if that were possible.”⁸⁷ Tom ran a telegraph exchange office from his home, and at 2:30 the next morning the telegraph wires “commenced to whiz,” which turned out to be a “put on” by Tom, his way of getting the boys up and on their way early.⁸⁸

At 4 o’clock in the morning, with the sun not yet up, Tom and his guests were on the road again on what would be one of the best days of the whole trip, and certainly the best so far. First, they reached the town of Hamilton, “not a dry town,” where they enjoyed a fortifying and festive lunch of ginger cake and strong beer. Next would be a little nineteenth-century mountain biking, as they set out to “do” Pine Mountain,” the highest hills in Georgia. The roads proved great riding, and when they reached the top they paused for a few moments to take in “a fine view of the road for miles, as it twists and turns about the hills . . .”⁸⁹ The cyclists then cruised back down again through the scenic slopes, with plenty of opportunity to throw their knees over the handle bars and “let her go,” as the phrase went. They took a long rest at a place called White Sulphur Springs, which had become a health resort destination with a spa hotel. There they made themselves at home on the pastoral grounds, lounging around with their wealthy cohorts and sampling the four mineral-rich springs. Hill doesn’t mention as much in his account, but the sulfur water from those springs was not only thought to be healthful, but was believed by some to have magical healing properties. During the Civil War, injured soldiers were taken there to recover.⁹⁰ Whatever they thought about the legends, the three travelers from New Orleans “indulged in great quantities” of the water before continuing on their way.⁹¹ Arriving that evening in the town of Greenville, Georgia, they found themselves greeted by a large and enthusiastic crowd. There they regaled onlookers with a riding exposition, “Ingram doing a stand over the handle bars and a mount from a reclining position that captured the town.” They were then serenaded by a big brass band, an event they regretted being a bit too sleepy to be enthusiastic about.⁹²

⁸⁶ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

⁸⁷ *L.A.W. Bulletin*. Vol 3. November 5, 1886. 470-471.

⁸⁸ *Daily Picayune*. “Bicycle to Boston.” July 23, 1886.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

⁹⁰ “The Springs,” <http://meriwetherwhitesulphursprings.com>

⁹¹ *Ibid*.; *L.A.W. Bulletin*. Vol. 3. November 12, 1886. 490.

⁹² *L.A.W. Bulletin*. Vol. 3. November 12, 1886. 490.

With the roads finally cooperating, the next day the little touring group was able to ride a full seventy-two miles to Atlanta. After four days, here was the end of Tom's escort, much to the regret of Captain Hill, who wrote of him in superlative terms: "A kinder, more considerate gentleman and enthusiastic wheelman never lived."⁹³ When Tom left he seemed to take with him not only his inspiring personality but his good luck. As it turned out, the sulfur water they drank back in White Sulphur Springs might not have proven so healing for Charlie. He became alarmingly ill that night. "We thought he'd throw up the sponge (He did everything else.)"⁹⁴ To give Charlie a chance to recover they rested half a day then took a train twenty miles to make up lost time, then cycled another thirty-three to Gainesville, getting drenched again by a violent thunderstorm. As they made for the Blue Ridge Mountains in the morning they went back to riding along the railroad tracks. The roads of red Georgia clay, made soft by rains, clung to their wheels "like so much putty" and "wound in and about the hills in a very aggravating fashion."⁹⁵ The railroad provided a more direct path through the hills through a series of "cuts" and "fills." Many of the "fills," stretches where dips in the undulating topography had been filled in to create a level bed for the tracks, were fifty to seventy-five feet high. They feared the strong winds blowing through the mountains passes would blow them over the edge. Just such a thing happened to Harry, sending him and his wheel tumbling all the way down. He managed to walk away from the scare with just a few scratches and rattled nerves. When they reached Mount Airey, high in the mountains, they were treated to the peculiar architecture of a Swiss settlement and subjected to a cold rain that chilled them to the bone.⁹⁶

Despite their troubles, the travelers were getting a thrill out of their mountain tour, seeing the country from the special vantage point afforded them by their novel transportation. "The scenery here is grand," wrote Hill, "wild and picturesque, and with the dark gray clouds hanging over the mountains formed an impressive picture."⁹⁷ They were halfway to Boston now, far beyond thoughts of turning back for home. After two weeks on the road the travelers had toughened up, in more ways than one. They'd gotten used to the frequent rain, and they'd become better riders, more skilled and also more gutsy, speeding recklessly on rough roads and coasting with abandon, knees draped over handle bars, letting her go and whizzing down hills that were "positively dangerous." Their adventure had relieved them not only of physical timidity but also a good deal of bourgeois vanity. The formerly well-groomed gentlemen

⁹³ *L.A.W. Bulletin*. Vol. 3. November 12, 1886. 490.

⁹⁴ *Daily Picayune*. "By Bicycle to Boston." July 23, 1886.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

were, as Hill put it, “the toughest-looking trio that could be selected from the grand army of tramps.”⁹⁸ Alternating assaults by rain and sun had faded their shirts to a marble of colors, their pants were made of holes and dirt, their hats were beaten all out of shape, and their shoes were bursting apart. The sun had baked their faces and necks brown, and their fists, as they gripped the handle bars of their machines, were not only sunburned but as bruised and gnarled as those of any longshoreman on the Mississippi.

Their equipment, too, was taking a beating. By the time they made it out of the mountains and into Charlotte, Harry had broken his back wheel fork. Captain Hill had caught the seat of his pants on his saddle while dismounting, ripping his pants and taking a nasty header onto the railroad track that left the backbone of his bicycle badly damaged. And whatever had disagreed with Charlie back in Atlanta wasn’t done with him, as he found himself “doubled over with cramps.” In Charlotte, Harry got his bicycle fixed and the other two went shopping, picking up a new pair of pants for Captain Hill and new shoes for Charlie. Hill’s new pants would soon have a nice big hole in the knee though. Peddling along merry and worry-free over well-ballasted crossties, he caught a spike in his little back wheel, sending him flying over the handle bars to bash his knee on another spike, leaving him with a nasty wound. It was his first injury on the whole trip.⁹⁹

The travelers continued to meet bad roads and knee-deep mud, but in their new-found toughness they began to take the adversities of the road in stride, seeming to revel in their rough condition, perhaps feeling liberated. What they were expecting, when they started out on the journey, was the pleasure of cycling, the leisurely taking in of scenery, and the glory of accomplishing their feat. What they discovered, once they’d gotten used to it, was the strange joy of voluntary hardship, the kind of pride that comes from getting used to pain and discomfort and finally failing to give a damn about one’s outward appearance. In this way they were a sort of precursor the modern-day credit-card carrying “gutter punk”—at least that is exactly what they would have looked like. (Actually in one town, to their great amusement, they were taken for travelers with Barnum’s Circus.)¹⁰⁰ Their social privilege allowed them the luxury of escaping the normal expectations of polite society while still benefitting from it. For, despite their appearance, they were treated all the same with respect wherever they went. They may have looked like tramps, but they could afford nice meals and warm places to sleep, and they were not social outcasts but heroes, greeted by cheering crowds as they rode from town to town.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

By May 15, they had made it to Lynchburg, Virginia, from which they rode through the mountains into Shenandoah Valley. Here as they approached the Mason-Dixon line they came into the historically-industrialized part of the country. They passed the abandoned locks and dams of a now out-of-use transportation canal.¹⁰¹ Road development here was far more congenial to bicycle travel. In fact the Shenandoah Valley was famed among American cyclists as possibly the best riding in the country. At Lexington they entered a toll road, which was hilly but so smooth at times as to seem sandpapered. Finally they had a chance to sustain some real speed, coasting down hills wide open and full of confidence. Six miles along the road, though, Captain Hill and Harry turned around to look for Charlie and spotted him on the previous hill, staggering in the road and bleeding from the head, having taken what Hill called “a most unaccountable header.” He must have suffered a pretty spectacular tumble. It took thirty minutes to revive him, pouring water from a nearby stream over his head. He probably had a concussion, and in the modern day of medical caution would have been strapped into a neck brace and taken in for x-rays. But the only concern Captain Hill had for Charlie was how to get him back on the wheel, as he was reluctant and trembling with fear. They managed to coax him into it eventually. “Riding slowly,” wrote Hill, “he gradually came to a good form, and we were soon doing twelve miles an hour again.”¹⁰²

An hour later the teenaged Harry was the next to go off the wheel, making a sharp turn to avoid a horse and buggy coming unexpectedly out of a barn at the foot of a hill. He managed to escape injury through spry and speedy dismount, but one of his handlebars was badly wrenched. They were able to bend the handle bar back into place and get going again but, following their mishaps, the two young riders were content to slow down the pace some. Captain Hill was having none of that. He had a fire in him to take advantage of the prime riding conditions and make as much mileage as possible. Leaving his companions behind he rode at top speed, spotting the other two for the last time two hills behind him. Also behind him was a dark storm coming over the mountains, and he pedaled hard to out-race it. An hour after he first spotted the clouds in the distance, torrential rain and hail caught up with him. After thirty minutes of that he gave up and stopped at the town of Woodstock, where the other two showed up forty-five minutes later, wet and muddy. Hill’s insistence on such a furious pace paid off. That day the three of them had cycled 106 miles, making them the first riders from the New Orleans Bicycle club to complete a “century.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

In a couple of days the southern tourists rode across the Mason-Dixon line, having their coffee in West Virginia, breakfast in Maryland, and supper in embattled Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Over the next week they met with considerably more favorable road conditions in the industrially-developed Northeast. Entering the part of the country where he'd grown up, Captain Hill found much to admire. "We had now entered a section of country that appeared to be very prosperous. Every acre was under cultivation . . . Such is the industry of the land that the dwellers all appear to be wealthy."¹⁰⁴ In Trenton, New Jersey, the travelers were entertained by the local bicycle club and, for the first time on their journey, got drunk, reveling that night with their cohorts until the late hour of twelve o'clock. In New York City, where cycling clubs were numerous, they found to their pleasure that the streetcars were prepared to carry bicycles. As they neared Boston the roads became smoother and smoother, and they were joined by other riders come out to escort them on the final triumphant miles of their long tour.¹⁰⁵

On the evening of May 24, twenty-nine days after they had set off from Washington Square, the three cyclists of the New Orleans Bicycle Club rode into Boston and registered as guests at the clubhouse of the Massachusetts Cycling Club, the oldest cycling club in the country. Hill wired a special telegram back to the *Daily Picayune*, reporting that they had arrived on time, having ridden eighty-five miles that day. They had, according to their estimation, wheeled 1,237 miles, walked 329, and gone 218 by rail. They didn't show in the competitions of the LAW meet, but their bicycles were put up on display, and for the next few days they enjoyed the congratulations of their fellow cyclists while recounting the tales of rain, heat, flood, and crashes. Their tour had set no records, apart from their being the first southern wheelmen to make such a trip,¹⁰⁶ but as a group from New Orleans they would have made an entertaining lot of story tellers. The thing about traveling tales is that mishaps make for the best stories, and they must have been at least a little glad, now that it was all over, that they had so many to tell.

When they returned home to New Orleans, by rail, their friends held a grand reception banquet at Astredo's, a restaurant at the lakeside resort spot of the West End. That night the wine flowed late into the evening as their friends presented the riders with gold medals and made speeches in their honor.¹⁰⁷ Although their accomplishment was overshadowed in the national scene by grander tours of other cyclists, Captain Hill, Charlie Fairchild, and Harry Fairfax would for some time be celebrated in New Orleans and the cycling world of the South, which would host its first national LAW meet the following year, in St. Louis. In the end, the delegation from the NOBC did not prove

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Karl Kron later noted their feat, in an addendum to *Ten Thousand Miles on a Bicycle*.

that one could easily travel across the South by bicycle. They had demonstrated quite the opposite, in fact, and it is doubtful that they regaled their friends with stories about how easy the riding was. In any case, despite a lot of talk about it, no one from New Orleans went out on such a tour again anytime soon. But they had proven their own grit in pulling the tour off, and also that the obstacles involved were no match for their pride, no matter how many falls came after.

¹⁰⁷ *Daily Picayune*. "By Bicycle to Boston." July 23, 1886.

Holly Beach

We had arrived at Holly Beach near midnight on the eve of the Fourth of July. The beach was quiet and deserted except a few pick-up trucks and a handful of camper trailers. A razor- sharp sliver of moon hung in a black sky. We rode up and down the beach, illuminating the brown sand with the headlights of a rented car, occasionally passing pickup trucks, the beds full of young people out for a late-night cruise .

A little farther inland, between the shore and the highway, RVs huddled in little clusters, and a few newly-built beach houses stood in the air like birdhouses on 17-foot pilings. Some were plain pre-fab houses, a few were more grandiose two-story affairs with wrap-around decks and weather vanes atop their steeply-pitched roofs. The scene, at first glance, was unremarkable: just a little group of vacationers, here to enjoy an annual tradition on this muddy beach in south Louisiana—a tradition that, like the small resort community that once stood here, all but disappeared in the wake Hurricane Rita. When the storm made landfall four years earlier on this isolated Cajun beach-town in southwest Louisiana, there were some five hundred little houses, a couple of stores, three bars, a church. After September 21, 2005, it was all gone. The only thing left standing, they say, was a telephone pole.

This was ground zero for the hurricane that will forever live in the shadow of her big sister, Katrina. Or was Rita the big sister? Rita was a category 3 when she made landfall, stronger than Katrina when she roared through St Bernard Parish into New Orleans a few weeks earlier. Unlike with Katrina, one could not point to the incompetence of the Army Corps of Engineers or the greed of Big Oil or the corruption of government. You could not blame shipping channels or erosion or faulty levee systems. The devastation was certainly comparable, but here it was only attributable to nature's pure wrath. Nature alone swept this place away. Given what went on here every year, Jerry Falwell might have seen justice in it.

For generations Holly Beach was a major gathering place on summer holidays, particularly the Fourth of July, when families and young people from all around Louisiana and the vicinity of nearby Houston, Texas, would descend every year by the thousands. Many came to small camps, vacation homes passed down through the generations. For those whose families who did not own a camp, there were ones for rent on the cheap. Some came down towing RVs that they set up right along the water's edge. The little resort, referred to as the Cajun Riviera, had been washed away before, in 1957, by Hurricane Audrey. Back then, almost fifty years hence, the families had returned and repopulated the beach with little cabins, built by the owners the same way the previous ones had been. Like the small stretch of grimy beach on which they stood, they were rustic and humble, but they were what those people had, and it was theirs.

By day they swam in the dirty brown water, barbecued, and harvested fish, crabs, and shrimp from the plentiful Gulf. By night the party turned wild. Zydeco bands played all night in rough bars where brawls spilled out onto sand. Trucks cruised up and down the beach blaring Zydeco or Rock or Hip Hop. In the beds of the trucks drunk girls in bikinis screamed and bared their breasts while the older folk shook their heads remembering their own wilder days. Along with the revelers there was a constant presence of police and ambulances flashing blue and red lights up and down the beach in an effort to control the chaos. On this night sparse campers set off a few fireworks, distant whistles and pops seeming to answer each other. Finding little to see, my friend and I returned to our hotel in the nearby city of Sulphur.

On Independence Day I tagged along with the photographer friend and a reporter for *The New York Times*. They were interviewing people for a feature story on Holly Beach. As we moved along the beach speaking to different families, it didn't take long for a bitter political debate to reveal itself--a classic case of the haves versus the have-nots. The latter just wants the chance to come back and rebuild the way they did before--at their own risk--and the former wants to see the area, including their now-more-valuable property, protected from another scene of destruction like that in 2005.

In the weeks following Hurricane Rita, FEMA stepped in and assisted in clearing the mountains of debris that had been this poor man's resort town. After the cleanup, new building restrictions were put in place under Louisiana's Comprehensive Master Plan. The new rules, which, according to the Cameron Parish government, were intended to ensure the safety of the people and their property, include a requirement that all houses be raised to 17 feet to withstand the storm surge from future hurricanes. They also stipulate that a mechanical sewer system—a

required element, since there is no city sewer line here--can only be built for a single-family house occupying a minimum of 4 of the original 25' x 50' lots. For some, that has meant annexing neighbors' lots and paying a contractor to build their new "bird houses" to code. For others, the new restrictions are prohibitive, and it means not coming back at all. For still others there is a middle option: pulling up RVs where their beach houses once stood and making the best of it.

We met our first of two Broussard families sitting outside the used RV they had bought after the storm. Two young girls, their neighbors, painted white Styrofoam floats scavenged from the beach in red, white, and blue designs for the fourth of July. The Broussards, like others, had been permitted to build a small storage shed on the ground and were allowed to keep the RV parked there so long as it was always road-ready in case of a need for evacuation. The girls did their work on a rusty old riding lawn mower, which the Broussards used to keep their lawn manicured. Flower beds were planted with perennials. A faux straw beach umbrella shaded a bistro table. This was their sitting room and their entertaining room, and here the Broussards spoke to us of how the new rules made it impossible for them and so many others like them to rebuild their vacation homes. They spoke bitterly of the rumored redevelopment plans, which included multi-story condos and a truck stop with a Casino – hard to imagine plopped in the middle of this sparsely populated marshland.

Gazing down the beach from the Broussards' yard we could see a new two-story yellow house, perched high in the sky over an SUV with Texas plates, of another Broussard family of no relation – not, at least, for many, many generations – to the RV dwellers. The second Broussard family, who worked in the oil industry in Houston, showed us around their new beach home, which was near completion. We admired the granite countertops, the legacy stove, the custom tile work. Before Rita, the Broussards were planning to retire to their property here--inherited from parents--and had been trying to find a way to expand the camp confined by its small lot. Because of the hurricane, they were able to buy their neighbors' lots and build the two-story, five-bedroom retirement home in which we stood looking out toward the oil platforms in the distance.

Asked about the new building restrictions, these Broussards argued that the rules had a purpose: to protect people and their property, particularly people with property like theirs that would be in greater danger from another storm should their neighbors' homes become dislodged and beat against theirs in the howling winds and gushing storm surge. They were, for that reason, concerned about the presence of the RVs. Their own RV, which they had occupied while waiting for their new house to become habitable, still stood outside. They hoped to get some

businesses back again and admitted that the height requirement made that difficult. They offered no solution to the problem other than getting some kind of “zone” that would allow them to have different rules than other beaches down the road.

The political implications of the reporter’s questions were not lost on Mr. Broussard. “People can come back if they want to,” he said, unprompted by any direct question on the subject. “If they want to come back and rebuild they can come back.” It does seem difficult, however, for a working class family that lost a \$30,000 camp to come back and build a house that would cost at least \$150,000 to meet the new codes.

It’s not only a matter of economics, but a fact of simple math, that makes it impossible for all the families to return. You have to have a sewage system, and to put in a mechanical sewage system for a single-family dwelling, according to the new rules, you have to build on four lots. That fact alone will logically reduce the number of families that can rebuild.

For those who do purchase their neighbors’ lots the price has increased considerably, from \$1,000 before the storm to somewhere between \$5,000 and \$10,000. The values are unstable and have been inflated by speculators. There are those who look at this empty stretch of ugly, dirty brown beach and see dollar signs. There is money to be made here, or so they hope. At least one local resident, a man named Lee Stelly, who owned thirteen rental cabins before the storm, is certain that plans to build condos and apartments on this land simply won’t work, that the location is too remote and unattractive to be a proper beach resort.

From Mr. Stelly’s seventeen-foot-high porch we could see all the way down the beach in either direction. American flags flew from the new quarter-of-a million-dollar vacation homes. They also flew from the tiny campers with blue-tarped porches. Mr. Stelly went inside and brought back a postcard. It was an aerial photograph of the beach taken maybe twenty years ago. I looked back and forth, from the photograph of so many little rooftops, to the nearly empty beach stretching along the Gulf of Mexico. And what if Holly Beach, as it had been, never comes back? Should it, even? This collection of dirty fishing camps where poor people came to drink and fight and litter wasn’t sanitary, after all, and it wasn’t safe. Sooner or later, it had to go.

It bothered me, though, that it had to go now not because it wasn’t a safe place to live, or because the young people just weren’t interested in it anymore, or because people didn’t have the money to rebuild their homes. It just had to change into something else, something that would no longer belong to the poor and reckless set but to people of means and responsibility, the people who live by rules and plan wisely for the future. This would become one

more place where the unruly spirit of people who had so little to lose would no longer reign, deposed by the deity of monetary wealth, whose creation and preservation trump everything in the end, and which cannot easily be argued against.

A Beautiful Day in "The Neighborhood"

Good Children once ran downriver out of New Orleans. That avenue, the thoroughfare that extends from downtown through the Ninth Ward into St. Bernard Parish, is now called St. Claude Avenue. A grassy median, the “neutral ground,” as it’s called here, divides the four lanes, and the four lanes divide the rest of the Upper Ninth Ward from the section along the Mississippi River referred to as the Bywater. That’s my neighborhood. Or, as my fellow denizens are in the habit of referring to it, “the neighborhood.”

Historically working-class, the Bywater is an old suburb of wooden houses crowded together on small blocks. Nearly all of the cottages, townhouses, and shotguns of Creole, Victorian, Italianate, and Greek Revival architecture were built in the nineteenth century on what was once plantation land. In the backyards of each house, the Creoles and the German, Irish, and Italian immigrants who first lived here kept gardens. Many people still do. Some people keep chickens; one guy I know has a goat. Once a neighborhood in decline, the Bywater has for many years offered those willing to make some repairs a chance to buy a house for cheap and become homeowners while still enjoying an urban lifestyle. The rapping of hammers and screeching of saws were common sounds even before Hurricane Katrina, which did little damage to the neighborhood. (The Bywater, by being on the natural river levee, is on high ground, and so did not suffer the massive flooding that most of the city did.)

Propelled by rising real estate prices, a wave of bohemian culture swells downriver from the French Quarter, the surf breaking through the Bywater as a fringe of artists and musicians seeking cheap rent near the Quarter, where tourism provides work. An influx of new residents, mostly white, includes those who are attracted not only to the Bywater’s proximity to the Quarter but to the character of the neighborhood. The atmosphere of

urban life in a bucolic setting attracts both artists living in poverty and those with money. Fresh upscale renovations share blocks with properties in various states of repair or dilapidation. Property values are on the rise. So are the rents. Twenty years ago, the neighborhood was predominantly black. Downriver from the railroad tracks, which divide the Bywater from its better-heeled upriver neighbor, the Marigny, the racial makeup becomes more mixed and the rents cheaper. If things continue in the same way, the fringe may creep farther downriver and across the Industrial Canal, to Holy Cross, where it is trickling in already.

The Bywater is the neighborhood I chose when I, a single woman in my twenties, decided to move to New Orleans. I grew up in a small town ninety miles away from New Orleans but lived outside of Louisiana—in Boston, Flagstaff, Dallas, and Istanbul—for ten years. Even before it was a conscious decision, I think I’d always intended to move to New Orleans one day to be near my family. For me, moving to New Orleans meant coming home. The working-class flavor of the neighborhood’s ethos evoked my own blue-collar roots, and the setting suited my affinity for old houses and my preference for urban life. New Orleanians tend to be married to their neighborhoods, but some claim that the Bywater carries a particularly strong sense of identity and neighborhood solidarity. I became attached quickly. Like a large number of my neighbors, I can hardly imagine living anywhere else. Days like today are why.

It is an afternoon in late April of two thousand nine, and I’ve been living in the Bywater for almost two years. I’ve ridden my bicycle thirteen blocks from my apartment near the Industrial Canal to just the Bywater side of the tracks, where bicycles nestle against fences and sign-posts along St. Claude Avenue. After securing my bicycle to a stop sign, I cross the avenue to join a slow crowd drifting toward the faces of four shotgun houses, painted in candy-fruit colors and known collectively as the Truck Farm. Today is the Wednesday between the two weekends of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. I won’t be attending Jazz Fest this year--too expensive, too crowded--but for this I’ve taken the day off work and bought an advance ticket for twenty-five dollars. It is almost four o’clock, and Chaz Fest has been going since noon.

At the end of a concrete driveway, two people sit at a small table in the shade of an umbrella, taking money and looking up the names of will calls. The driveway passes between clapboard walls into a yard that spans the four houses. Trees shade a crowd of friends and neighbors standing in clumps, greeting familiar faces with nods and waves. Their chatter mingles with the shouts and laughter of children who dart around unsupervised, occupying the

world of childhood, largely oblivious to the adults. A girl around nine years old sits in a tiny folding chair at a table laden with bottles of nail polish. The sign taped to the side of the table reads, "Manicures \$1".

Ahead of me, a roof of rust-streaked tin caps an outbuilding of bargeboard planks--some missing and some hanging at odd angles--that stretches left and right, spanning the width of the yard. The stalls of the shed, once a chicken coop, house food and drink stands and a booth selling t-shirts and CD's. On either end of the yard, white catering tents shelter the folding tables of other food vendors. Menu-boards in hand-painted colors adorn the shed and catering tents. Nailed to a tree, wooden signs point the way to beer stands, food, two stages, port-o-potties and a kids' area. On the right end of the shed, a breezeway opens into the tree-ringed yard of St. Augustine grass that serves as the main stage area. The rustic cheer into which three hundred or so of my neighbors have poured this afternoon invites me to smile at the people around me, and they return my grins.

Turning left, I pass through the other breezeway at the end of the outbuilding to the side stage. A roof of cypress beams and blue tarp slants perpendicular from the main shed over a raised wooden platform. The bandstand, tiny, encases musicians and their instruments in the proportions of a puppet show. In the pool of sunlight at the front of the stage, a few people sit in the dirt and pine straw gazing up. Others lean against the bargeboard wall of the shed. Most stand or sit in folding chairs among the trees in the bosky pocket that extends from the side stage to the back of the Truck Farm, where an opening in the bushes delivers you to the side of the main stage.

Fifty or so people listen as The Happy Talk Band's lead singer, Luke Allen, front and center of the stage wearing a black beret and aviator sunglasses, his red beard bristling bright in the full sun, strums and sings to the melodic lines of Alex McMurray's acoustic guitar accompanied by an electric base and a keyboard:

Take no prisoners

Take no pictures

Burn your passport

And your scriptures

The weather is warm but not hot. A bird chirps and the music, breeze, and sunlight filter through the trees. A hint of marijuana smoke drifts through the earth-scented air.

I position myself in the shade near the front of the stage and listen to one of my favorite bands in New Orleans while admiring the crowd, the way the light renders everyone's skin smooth and their hair soft. The music is quiet enough that people can chat at normal volume. Young women wear sundresses and skirts in floral and pastel

and young men, wearing shorts and flip-flops, stand listening with arms folded to chests. But the crowd is not an altogether young one. The average age is probably about thirty-five. There's a lot of gray hair. Some men wear plaid shirts and white sneakers and others sport tie-dyed t-shirts. One woman, wearing a fedora over grey braids and a floral skirt, carries a white shoulder bag which reads, in black block letters: "OLD PEOPLE ROCK."

From the back of the crowd, a black man wearing a baseball cap, khaki shorts, and white socks and sneakers winds his way toward the stage. He dings, with a slight tap, the reception desk bell that is attached, along with two coffee cans, to his washboard. He steps up on the stage and strokes and taps and dings along with the band. He is man himself: Washboard Chaz.

Chaz Fest is less like a music festival than the best backyard party I've ever been to. It was started by musicians who just wanted to play. In two thousand six, the year after Katrina, Jazz Fest was scaled back by one day, that day being the Thursday that was reserved for local musicians. Alex, Chaz, their wives and a few others were sitting in Alex's backyard at the Truck Farm on a nice spring day in March--a few weeks before Jazz Fest--drinking beers and "eating sour grapes and all," as Alex puts it, because they and their friends' bands hadn't been invited to play the Fest. They were talking about just going down to the Fair Grounds, the site of Jazz Fest, and having their own festival across the street. Then someone said, *Why don't we just play here?* They realized that all they had to do was build a stage, that they had between them all the equipment they needed to put a festival on right there. As Alex explains, in those months after the storm, "we felt like we were living on the frontier." Food was scarce, but they didn't lock their doors. Anything seemed possible. The next day the beer had worn off but the idea stuck. Jazz Fest was only a few weeks away and they didn't have much time, but they made it happen. The first year was haphazard. There were problems with the beer taps. They didn't have enough help. It rained. "But it was magical," says Chaz. I interviewed him briefly one day when he walked into a neighborhood bar. "It was like Woodstock or something. People sitting in the rain." I asked him why they called it Chaz Fest. "Well, it sounds better than Alex Fest, doesn't it?" Chaz is my neighbor. I can see into his backyard from the window of my camelback apartment. "If you have any more questions," he said at the end of our interview, "just holler out the window."

Chaz plays along with Luke singing a ballad to New Orleans, the final lyrics concluding:

Everyone is drowning here, and everyone is free.

God protects these fools who build their homes below the sea-ea-ea-ea.

At the end of the last song, a few “woo hoos” erupt amid quiet applause. Luke announces that the Too Be Continued Brass Band will soon start at the Main Stage, “which is over there,” he says, pointing over the trees and bushes. “If you get lost, turn around.” A chuckle flutters through the trees.

As the people disperse and make their way around to the main stage area, Luke and the other band members step off the stage to chat and shake hands with friends. From the main stage, the drums and tuba of TBC start to the clapping rhythm of the crowd. I tap my heels as the horns come in. Hungry, I make my way toward the catering area in search of crawfish bread. For five bucks, the hunk of greasy bread oozing with crawfish-filled cheese is a screaming deal the likes of which you won’t find at Jazz Fest.

With my crawfish bread in hand I join the crowd at the main stage, a portable platform and canopy set up at the edge of the ring of trees and bushes that encircles the half-acre clearing. The name of the place, the Truck Farm, enters my mind, and I imagine the broad yellow faces of sunflowers upturned to a sun shining on corn, peppers, tomatoes, okra, and snap beans growing in rows. Now, in that place in the sun, happy humans sit, stand, or dance to the foot-stirring beats and horn riffs of TBC, the second-line sound. The large speakers of the main stage swell the music to fill the bubble of green and people back to the breezeway. At the foot of the stage, there is room to step, strut, and twirl. Shoulders lift with the beat. Grinning boys dance with barefoot girls who clap and shimmy their hips. Seated in the grass at the side of the stage, I concentrate on my crawfish bread, protecting my fingers from the heat of the tin foil with grease-stained napkins.

Ky, the eight-year-old kid whose backyard neighbors the Truck Farm, runs through the crowd and dives under the stage, crawling on his belly through the two-foot space between the grass and the feet of the band. He will not be reprimanded by security. He will not be reprimanded by anyone. Ky emerges from the other side of the stage then tears off through the crowd again ahead of the boy who is chasing him for the ephemeral reason that kids just chase each other around sometimes.

When I’ve eaten my crawfish bread, I join a tall, skinny black man (who could pose as a stunt double for Mayor Nagin) in front of the stage. He knows me from a neighborhood bar called the Saturn Bar. He tries to teach me to dance like I’m not a white girl, stepping to the bass line and letting my shoulders follow. I’m not very good at it, and Parnell laughs and shakes his head. After dancing for a couple of songs, I tire of making a fool of myself and walk off in search of a beer.

I've nearly finished my plastic cup of Miller Lite when Betina, whose kid was crawling under the stage, appears through the small gate at the back of the Truck Farm that connects to her backyard. She wears her long brown hair in a ponytail and large earrings dangle from her ears. She greets me with a wide smile and peck on the cheek. "Ah, you are here," she says in her German accent. "I didn't know you were here. You should come to my house. We have some beer. First I want to say hello to some people." We make our way through the crowd together, greeting friends, and I follow her back through the little gate into her L-shaped backyard, where a dozen or so kids are running around swings, ladders, and slides bolted to the beams of a play set. Vines climb the fences. Chickens peck in the chicken yard. Betina says one chicken, perhaps following the children, keeps getting out of the pen and escaping into Chaz Fest. A boy swings on a hammock, his hair whipping up and down with his wild arcs. A couple of people I recognize are playing ping-pong under a screen canopy just outside the back door of the house. A mirliton vine crawls up a wooden fence and onto the canopy, dangling the Bywater's favorite backyard vegetable, a green pear-shaped squash, overhead. Around the side of the house, Miguel, Betina's husband, his long black hair looped through a hair tie, is tending to the chicken that smokes and sizzles on the grill, tempting me out of vegetarianism (I consider crawfish plants) with its piquant aroma. In one corner of the yard, kids are having their faces painted in tiger stripes. Two little girls have set up a kids' snacks booth where they are selling juice boxes, chips, lollypops, and flavor ice on a table draped with a Winnie-the-Pooh tablecloth. I ask to buy a flavor ice for fifty cents and a girl races into the house to retrieve it from the freezer, calling to me from the back door: "What color?"

"Blue!" I shout.

In a claw-foot bathtub filled with dirt, Betina and Miguel are growing carrots, the feathery green leaves poking up from the rich soil. A little girl tugs on Betina's arm and asks if she can have a carrot. "See that?" says Betina. "Instead of asking for candy, the kids ask for carrots." She shrugs.

We can hear the band from the main stage, singing *too good to be true*.

I've known Miguel and Betina for about a year now. I met them through a woman I met at Luke Allen's wedding, which, incidentally, was held at the Truck Farm. Immigrants from Guatemala and Germany, respectively, they earn a living and raise their two children by making jewelry that Miguel sells at the French Market--on the edge of the Quarter--on the weekends. Their backyard is a gathering place for adults and children alike, a place where I was welcomed as a friend from the first time I came to visit and a place where I've made new friends. Betina's

backyard party is not officially part of Chaz Fest, but I can see and hear the main stage from there, so, as I sip beer and play ping-pong, I'm not missing anything.

As the afternoon gives way to evening, I pass again through the little gate and plop down in the grass in front of the main stage, where a subdued crowd watches The Geraniums, an acoustic and electric guitar group--another one of the half-dozen or so bands that Alex McMurray plays in--with a stylistically eclectic violin and an authoritative vocalist delivering ballads that alternate between the wry and the sublime.

I don't wanna live where everybody lives . . .

Ky dashes between spectators and band then emerges from under the left side of the stage. A tuba player is introduced to cheers and joins the band for the next song. The violin opens to the rhythm of the drum kit. The song is "Miss New Orleans." On the right side of the stage, two girls and a boy pause and look left and right for Ky, who has momentarily eluded them. A man taps one of the girls on the shoulder and points at Ky, standing with hands on hips, grinning in mischief and triumph. "Get 'im!" the man says, and they tear after him through the opening in the bushes that leads around to the side stage.

As he does with every band that day, Chaz appears on stage with the Geraniums, leaning back slightly, his languid wrists guiding his fingers in chirping, tapping, and dinging his washboard. *You know what it means to be married to Miss New Orleans*, go the vocals. A couple I know from the neighborhood, Nick and Kate, recline in the grass next to me. The pink flower in her hair matches the one in his fedora. With my legs stretched in front of me and my palms anchored in the grass, I slide into the joy of life in the neighborhood, its relish for the beauty of what is present and the celebration of music as a reason to come together, a chance to dance with a barefoot girl, a shared bliss.

This April evening, the politically liberal folks of the Bywater are still basking in the glee of last November's Presidential election. On either side of the stage hang images painted on mini trampolines. On the left, the yellow sun of the Obama campaign logo rises over an American flag, the word CHAZ turned on its side in the bottom left corner. On the right, a red, white, and blue portrait of Chaz, a la Shepherd Fairy's famous portrait of Barack Obama, gazes over a crowd lulled into pleasure by beer, food, music and the benevolence of the weather. Twilight falls and floodlights illuminate the trampoline orbs from behind, casting a glow on upturned faces.

Fabric Warrior

Zahdan, in an apron and green rubber gloves, is telling me about the 1993 DJ Jubilee video “Back that Thang Up,” a classic of New Orleans bounce music. Among the exuberant crowd shown dancing in the summer heat are a few women wearing brightly-colored tie-dyed shirts. Zahdan says those are his shirts, or at least those are shirts he made, and that video significantly increased the demand for that style. “So I was making a lot of Eruptions back then,” he says. “Eruption is the only one that really works in bright colors like that. It’s the only one with no black in it.”

While Zahdan works at one of the two worktables in the small, cluttered room, Greg sits on the other. He folds his skinny legs against his chest, crossing them at the ankles, and hooks his elbows over his knees with one hand clutching the other wrist, gargoyle-like. Greg introduced Zahdan to the art of tie-dye in 1988. He’s in town this week by chance, and his presence for this interview is eerily serendipitous. As Zahdan tells his story, Greg flicks his eyes between him and the TV in the corner, occasionally chiming in with some detail or correction.

Between the two of them, I’m perched on a stool, the felt tip of my pen whispering urgently along the blue lines of my little notebook. Zahdan’s narrative jumps around in time and space, dragging me along rambling digressions that lead back to the answer to my question long after I have forgotten what my question was.

“That critter right there. . .” he says, pointing to a t-shirt that hangs on the wall beside the front door. In the pattern, yellow and black lines radiate spider-like from the bottom, forming the shape of a cauldron. “Submergence, the *neon ting*, is the explanation of the mystical side of it.” The Submergence, with its upward lines, he tells me, represents the Yin, the feminine, water. The Emergence, curving down, represents the Yang, masculine, fire. Getting up from the table and walking across the room, he points to the converging lines in the center of the design. “I call

this 'The content of our conflict'. There's always images. There's a face, a head, and a body and arms, and there's legs. See how these lines come down? There's always a way out of a Submergence."

Pointing with a long wooden dowel he instructs me on the meaning of the patterns in the authoritative manner of a philosopher instructing a student. I get the idea when he is telling me these things that if I don't understand it's because I'm not looking hard enough, not listening. He asks me, "Do you see? Do you see it?" He looks expectantly at me and waits for my answer.

Zahdan's tie-dyes tell stories, he says. "I get to write on fabric. I consider myself an alchemist."

Earlier, the Fed Ex man delivered two large boxes, a shipment of the white t-shirts, pants, dresses, and skirts Zahdan uses as writing paper. He flips open the box to reveal stacks of pure, crisp cotton textile. Motioning again to the Submergence hanging on the wall, he says, "Did I tell you I'm also a fabric warrior? I hunt the wild whites and whip 'em into color? That's what I do. They come into my house this way and they leave my house that way."

*

On the Friday before Mardi Gras, Zahdan invited me over for dinner. He said he had a bowl of split pea soup and a present for me. We live in the same neighborhood in New Orleans, an old suburb of the French Quarter, downriver along the Mississippi, known as the Bywater. Our homes are on opposite ends--his on the upriver side, by the railroad tracks, and mine on downriver side, by the Industrial Canal. The trip from my house to his, by swiftly peddled bike, takes nearly ten minutes. Arriving under the pink late-afternoon sky, I mounted the concrete stoop and rapped on the glass pane in the front door. I could see into the front room of the shotgun house, his workshop, where a baker's rack stacked with gleaming white clothes stood next to an old fireplace mantle on the wall opposite a work table and a wooden shelf laden with plastic bottles full of dye. He came out and opened the side gate. I rolled my bike through the narrow alley along the house into the lush back garden. On a previous visit, I had found the backs of plastic chairs draped with freshly dried tie-dyes. From the little shed in the back of the garden, the dryer buzzer had sounded. Another batch ready to go.

When I stepped through the French doors that separate the back porch from the tiny kitchen, Zahdan was standing at the stove frying a pan of venison. He had never cooked venison like this before, and had called his mother to ask how. She told him to soak it overnight in vinegar, which he did, and to cook it for two hours, which he

did not intend to do. “My mother cooks everything too long. She’ll cook a pot of green beans for two hours.

‘Mama,’ I told her, ‘they’ll cook in fifteen minutes.’”

I dropped my bag on the floor and peeled off my tight fitting leather jacket. After weeks of unseasonably warm weather, it was getting cold, and I was wearing layers. Zahdan told me to make myself at home and offered me a drink. I laughed. I was still recovering from a round of Carnival parades the night before.

“All right, then, take your time.”

Zahdan complains that his sacrifice, if he can call it that, is that while everyone else is partying for Mardi Gras, he’s working, dying clothes and selling them at his booth at the French Market, catching the big wave of tourists.

When he first moved to New Orleans, in 1990, Zahdan was still a lanky man with big glasses, a black beard, and a full head of black dreadlocks. Now, almost twenty years later, his features have softened and his belly has rounded. His wire rimmed glasses rest on his nose mid-bridge, his beard is grey, a tie-dye bandana tied over his long grey locks. His punctuates his speech, crackling in a gentle drawl, with a sweet, warm chuckle that is almost grandmotherly.

He walked past me where I sat at the little kitchen table into the living room. From behind a pile on a shelf he pulled out a long sleeve t-shirt. “I made it like you asked: red, grey, and black, right?” The long sleeve t-shirt he handed me had been dyed in a spiral pattern--the one that looks like the backs of people in robes standing in a circle--a gift promised as a thank you for helping him with his Jazz Fest application. He had sold tie-dyes there in years before, but, times being so conveniently technological as they are, vendor applications now require properly formatted digital photographs and a level of internet savvy that a fifty-six-year-old artisan does not likely possess. With the help of me and a couple of other friends, though, Zahdan and his tie-dyes would be back at the Fest this year.

I had met Zahdan one evening the previous summer when I accompanied a friend to a small birthday party for her friend’s child. When we arrived, the party was wrapping up, and the adults were drinking beer on the front porch. Zahdan, never hesitant or circumspect, demanded my conversation, solicited my friendship, and instructed me to call him “Z.” It was clear to me that his initial interest in my person was based entirely on my being an attractive young woman. But I humored him. Before the night was over, in a logistical complication I’m still confused about, I found all one-hundred pounds of my little white self driving this rotund black man’s huge,

growling Bronco through the neighborhood to his house, while he drove his van. Considering that I'd had a few beers, I was surprised at the amount of faith he was putting in me to pilot what felt, after driving around in my little compact car, like a small warship through the narrow streets of the Bywater.

As I sat at the table examining the spiral of red and grey, he stood at his stove with one hand resting on his lower back and the other on the handle of the cast iron skillet, shaking onions and celery around in the oil which sizzled with brown lumps of fresh, sinewy venison.

"Where'd you get the deer?"

"Oh, a lot of people hunt deer on our land."

Northwest of New Orleans and Baton Rouge along the Mississippi River, Point Coupee Parish is French Creole plantation country. Dan Sterling, now known as "Zahdan," grew up in there on a narrow fifty-acre strip of land, once a part of the Argyle Plantation, on Bayou Lafouche. His father first rented the land in 1940--when the oldest of his five siblings was born--then bought it in 1965. This was the land where his ancestors had lived as slaves. His mother still lives there with Loraine, one of his four sisters, who moved back from New Orleans after divorcing her husband in 1990. Zahdan left home for college in 1968, but in 1984 he moved into his grandmother's house in Pointe Coupee to help care for his father who, after suffering many years with Parkinson's Disease, died in 1987.

Despite my ambivalence toward the introduction of tie-dye into my regular wardrobe, I pulled the long sleeve shirt over my other layers, grateful for the extra warmth on my way to another round of parades on a cold night. Once I had it on, I have to say, the pattern worked its charm.

"You wouldn't be the first one I converted," said Zahdan with a chuckle.

*

To prepare the clean, white fabric for dyeing, Zahdan first soaks it in soda ash. "How Procion MX dyes work," he says, "soda ash opens the molecules on the fiber and you dye into it. And the dye bonds to the molecules of the fabric, not on just the strands, like Rit dye does not bond, it's just like coloring the outside. Fiber-reactive dye goes completely through and saturates it."

Procion MX, a cold-water fiber-reactive dye, was first developed by ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries) England in 1956.¹⁰⁸ This dye can be applied directly to the fabric without submerging in vats. This innovation made it possible to apply several colors simultaneously, a technique that is necessary to create the patterns common to contemporary tie-dye design.

Unlike Rit and other grocery store dyes, which merely stain fabric, fiber-reactive dye does not wash out. This is because the molecules in fiber-reactive dye bond with the molecules of cellulose—the fiber that makes up both cotton and wool—in a covalent bond, which means they share electrons. Soaking the fabric in soda ash, an alkaline, increases the number of negatively charged hydrogen ions in the fabric. The hydrogen ions help the dye molecules bond with the cellulose molecules by supplying the extra electrons needed for the chemical reaction.¹⁰⁹

Zahdan understands the science. In 1968, before his senior year in high school, Southern University in Baton Rouge recruited him to study chemistry over the summer and awarded him a scholarship to attend the university the next fall. Zahdan tells me that, because of his precocious interest and aptitude, he probably could have studied chemistry at any school in the country after he graduated high school. Instead of graduating high school, though, he left a year early, accepting the scholarship offered him by Southern University. His decision, he says, was based on his wish to avoid the turmoil of forced desegregation that had begun that year in Point Coupee Parish.

Until that year, the local school board, in an effort to stave off forced desegregation, had funded the black high school, Batchelor High, very generously. Zahdan allows that the ample funding of his high school chemistry lab is probably what allowed him to become a chemistry whiz. In another ironic twist, the program for which he was recruited at SU was itself a response to desegregation, an effort by a traditionally black university to attract bright young black students whom they were losing to other, recently desegregated, institutions.

College was a transformative experience for Zahdan, as it is for a lot of people, and he finished with a Bachelor's degree not in chemistry but philosophy. His work as a tie-dye artist just brushes the surface of his inner chemist, who, he says, is "very submerged."

In the fall of 1983, Zahdan was hanging out and playing music with a friend at a house near the University of Houston. He had graduated from Southern University in 1975 and was working in carpentry around Nachidoches, Texas, near the Louisiana border. In a house full of college students where people came and went, a young woman

¹⁰⁸ "A Brief History of Tie-Dye," *Dyed in Vermont*

¹⁰⁹ Interview, Zahdan Sterling. February 2009.

named Miranda came in to take a shower. They met and ended up, somehow, pitching a tent in the living room for two weeks, from which they emerged only for toilet and cigarette breaks.

“Are they ever gonna stop? Are they ever coming out?” commented their cohorts.

“They come out,” others replied, “but they don’t stop.”

When the “tryst in the tent” ended, Miranda promptly fell in love with another guy, quit college and ran away to New Jersey. But she was soon back, heart-broken and without a plan. Zahdan invited her to come along and work with him. He had gone to work for Community Action, weatherizing the homes of poor people on government contracts. By then, the health of his father in Point Coupee was failing fast, which meant that Zahdan needed to spend as much time as he could at home. He moved into his grandmother’s house and, as a side project, started growing elephant garlic at his mother’s.

With work in Nachidoches, social life in Houston, and family obligations in Point Coupee, Zahdan and Miranda went on the road in his big 1974 Ford pick-up truck that he called the “Mad Green Machine.” He’d built a camper on the back with enough room for tools and a bed. Around the beginning of 1985, they were on their way back to Texas from New Orleans when they spotted a motor home for sale on the side of the highway. He turned around and bought it that day. For the next three and half years, Zahdan and Miranda traveled and worked out of that motor home.

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Zahdan spreads a pair of white drawstring cotton pants onto the worktable. He jabs a slender wooden dowel just to the left of the crotch and twists. As he wraps the fabric around the dowel, his fingers pleat with casual precision, forming a nine-inch round lump of damp, white cotton that looks ready to be popped in the oven and come out a cake. He stretches his arm across the table and plucks four rubber bands from a bin, snapping them around the fabric to hold it in place.

He’s making a simple spiral, like the one in the shirt he made for me. He forms Eruption, Submergence and Emergence by folding the fabric before twisting. Folding and “scrunching” the fabric rather than twisting makes other patterns, like the Sphinx.

Tie-dyeing is a form of textile art that has been practiced in many cultures—Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Persian, Peruvian, South American, and African—for thousands of years. It is a form of resist dyeing, in which restricting the flow of dye to certain areas creates patterns in the fabric. In batik, patterns are drawn onto the fabric

with wax, which is later dissolved, leaving its shape in relief. In the Indian art of bahndanni, points of fabric are tied off with bits of string to make small circles. In Japanese shibori, many methods, such as string-tying, pleating and stitching, are used to bind the cloth and create intricate patterns.¹¹⁰ The form of tie-dyeing familiar to contemporary American culture, which Zahdan practices, was developed in the 1970s. Many people, including Zahdan have come to make their living by it, as Zahdan eventually would: an outcome of many twists and folds of fate.

For three and half years, the weatherizing contracts took Zahdan and Miranda all over three counties in Texas. They would stop in Nachidoches to get their work assignments before heading out for three or four weeks of work, each job taking two or three days. Because they had a motor home, they were sent on the farthest-out jobs. They would rattle down “boon-docky” roads across several pastures, cattle gaps, and watering holes to places where it was hard to believe anyone had a house. They went out to the homes of elderly people who couldn’t afford to maintain their houses and did things like install insulation and solid core doors and seal windows. The government allotted a certain amount of money for each house, ostensibly to prevent air infiltration. The allotment grew from \$400 to \$1400 per house. “From that point on, I used every penny I could get my hands on to do everything I could for these people because, basically, it was a one shot deal . . . These were people who’d worked all their lives. They deserved every penny they could get from the government.” Zahdan did the hard labor while Miranda did the “goop work.” She finished the day with caulk in her hair and shellac in her eyelashes. “It was what you call ‘division of labor.’ She got to sleep late every day. She got nothing to complain about. It was great.”

When Zahdan told me this story, he laughed at this part, then sighed. The ice in his drink rattled against the side of the glass as he took a sip.

“We understood from the beginning the relationship had a definite time period to it.” The expiration date turned out to be 1989, the year he first sold tie-dyes.

*

Zahdan sets up his booth at the French Market, now under the steel canopy in stall number 129, almost every Saturday and Sunday. Kaleidoscopes of t-shirts, dresses, pants and skirts hang on chrome rods that run between and jut out from three walls of black metal grid. A sign propped on one wall says, “NO WAR.” Tourists and locals stroll the aisles of the open-air market. Across one aisle from Zahdan, a vendor sells scented oils and New

¹¹⁰ Charles E. Pellew. “Tied and Dyed Work,” *Craftsman*, 696-698.

Orleans t-shirts--\$5.99 or four for \$20. In front of his booth is a table stacked with used books. Filed in old Coca-Cola crates, sci-fi books are \$1 each.

Originally an Indian trading post, the French Market occupies a space between the French Quarter and the Mississippi River. It has been through many transformations throughout the history of the city, and its current incarnation is mainly a tourist destination where vendors, often immigrants, sell souvenir t-shirts, Mardi Gras masks and beads alongside novelty items, jewelry, books, toys, purses, wallets, and textiles. Before Hurricane Katrina, produce, seafood, spices and other edible fare were available, as well. Now, there is produce sometimes, but mostly it's just the flea market, which isn't very useful to locals (unless you need to do Christmas shopping and hate malls). But when I was a child, the organic nature of it, the array of eclectic merchandise, and the vendors with foreign accents fascinated me.

Around 1991, when I was ten or eleven years old, I might have walked by a small booth in front of the French Market, in the asphalt lot, where tie-dyed t-shirts were hanging on a cord in the afternoon sun. This may or may not have happened, but it is possible that I, as children will do, reached out my hand as I walked by and ran my fingers along the row of t-shirts bursting and swirling with color and said, "oooh," and that the black man in his mid-thirties standing there with dread-locks fanning out behind his head smiled and said, "Hello, there."

On Valentine's Day, I sat with Zahdan at the market. Teenaged couples walked by hand in hand and stopped to finger the bracelets and necklaces of African trade beads that Zahdan now sells along with the tie-dyes. A couple of middle-aged women pulled dresses off the rack and held them up against their bodies in the mirror propped against one wall of the booth. Zahdan talked with his prospective customers, helping them with sizing and pointing out the lines of the Submergence and Emergence, the concentric circles of Eruption, and the face in the Sphinx. I noticed that he managed to work in frequent references to his new girlfriend, the sweet habit of new love that, I smiled to realize, persists in a man of fifty-six.

A young girl--probably around ten or eleven--walked by with her family. Turning her head, she gasped. "Oh, I love hippies."

*

Sitting at his worktable, Zahdan squeezes dye from plastic bottles onto the disc of cotton, filling in the pie shapes outlined by the rubber bands. The purple, green, and orange dye pools for a moment then seeps into the crevices of the spiral.

In contemporary American culture, tie-dyeing is inextricably bound with the image of the hippie. Hippies did not invent tie-dye, but its lasting permeation into American fashion, if you can call it that, can almost certainly be attributed to one sub-group of the 1960s hippie culture—the Diggers.

The Diggers were a group of counter culture operatives in San Francisco in the late 1960s. If you like whole wheat bread, thank the Diggers. Many people credit their famous Digger Bread--baked in coffee cans and distributed at the Free Bakery—with the advent of a taste for bread that, in contrast to commercial products like Wonder Bread, resembled real food. If you are looking for someone to thank—or to blame—for American tie-dye, you might want to look up a gal named Judith Goldhaft.

One of the projects of the Diggers was the Free Store, at times referred to as the Free Frame of Reference or Trip Without a Ticket. Scrounging for free things and encouraging people to donate unwanted clothes and household goods, they set up a shop where people could take what they needed for free. The women set up a sewing and dyeing shop for people to bring their clothes in to be repaired, patched, and dyed.¹¹¹ A photo from that period shows Goldhaft holding up a long twisted snake of fabric bound with rubber bands crisscrossing every inch or so.¹¹² It was in that shop that Judy taught the other women how to tie-dye old clothes.¹¹³

After that, the art of tie-dye was passed from person to person. Twenty years after Judy Goldhaft taught the women of the Free Store shop how to tie-dye, Zahdan learned it from Greg and his wife Tiffany.

In late 1988, Zahdan and Miranda's motorhome pulled up to a laundromat in Nachidoches. Inside, a girl named Tiffany sat playing guitar. Zahdan struck up a conversation with her. He had a necklace that he needed repaired. She knew the knot, something called a "spirit weave." So, he followed her home, where he met her husband, Greg. They had just learned to do tie-dyes from a man called Tie-Dye Ron in Austin. Greg was really excited. He was, Zahdan swears, literally bouncing off the walls. They had learned from Ron how to do a basic spiral and were experimenting with making different patterns by folding the fabric in different ways. They had names for the new patterns. Emergence. Submergence. Greg was adamant that Zahdan learn how to do it.

"From Jump Street I had no interest."

But Zahdan started spending a lot of time at their house in Nachidoches, anyway. They were all playing music together. One day, in the spring of 1989, he came through with a few polo shirts he wanted tie-dyed. He went

¹¹¹ Emmett Grogan, *Ringolevio*. The Digger Archives. <http://www.diggers.org>.

¹¹² Chuck Gould. 1967 or 1968, The Digger Archives. http://www.diggers.org/images/photos/11a_1.jpg (accessed 5 March 2009). (information from alt text; gathered from page source).

off to work and came back two weeks later to find the shirts still weren't done. Greg, Tiffany, and a guy named Mike, who was staying there at the time, went out one afternoon that weekend, leaving him alone in the house. He'd been watching the three of them tie-dye for a few weeks and figured he knew how to do it. So.

"I went to dye those shirts."

By the time his friends returned a few hours later, he had gone out and bought a dozen more shirts to dye.

"Looks like the tie-dye bug bit again," Tiffany said.

"And I was certainly, uh, infected, I guess you could say."

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There are now three colors in six pie-shaped sections alternating around the circle. Zahdan flips the disc over and shows me how, with the colors bleeding through just barely on the other side, the fabric is now sufficiently saturated. Then, to my surprise, he covers that whole side with a layer of dark purple and then black. When the piece is finished, dark lines separate the colors and define the contours of the pattern.

"People don't realize," says Greg, "there's a lot of black in tie-dye."

Tie-dyeing was known about and promoted by various dye companies in America long before the Diggers adopted it. When Judy Goldhaft and the Diggers started making tie-dyes at the Free Store, they were probably using vat dyes, submerging the cloth in successive colors, as recommended by an article published in *Craftsman* in 1909. "In case . . . the fabric is dyed a light yellow shade before it is tied in, and then dipped in some other color, as, for instance, a light blue, the result will be a yellow pattern in a green background. It is extremely easy to continue this process of tying and dyeing until the pattern is composed of not only two or two or three, but five or six colors"¹¹⁴ In a promotional pamphlet published in 1937 by Diamond Dyes of Vermont, an article describes and recommends tie-dye as an "ancient art" which will "often supply the color accent needed in home or wardrobe." The pamphlet gives instructions for three tie-dying techniques—knotting, twisting, and string-tying.¹¹⁵ The three illustrations of tie-dyed scarves evoke the bohemian aesthetic of the late 1960s counterculture that would emerge thirty years later. This was no accident on the part of the dye companies.

According to a 2008 article in the *LA Times*, Rit Dye concocted a gonzo marketing campaign in the Greenwich Village of New York in 1965. Don Price, attempting to save the failing brand, went to the neighborhood

¹¹³ Grogan, *Ringolevio*

¹¹⁴ Pellew, 701.

¹¹⁵ Mae Martin. *Modern Color Magic*, 32.

full of youths who were becoming interested in hand crafts and convinced some artists to tie-dye bolts of velvet and chiffon.¹¹⁶ It seems likely that Judy Goldhaft, a dancer from New York, picked up the art in Greenwich Village and took it to Haight-Asbury.

The style, with its bright colors and cachet of homemade, unique personal expression, captured the heart and fashion sense of the Haight-Ashury crowd. Young people were pouring into the streets of San Francisco from all over the country in search of the psychedelic utopia of freedom and poverty that was being marketed to them by the mainstream media. HIP, The Haight Independent Proprietors, were a group of store owners who simultaneously battled with and made every effort to profit from the growing throng. Emmett Grogan, one of the original Diggers, writes, "Soon, their tie-dyed clothing was seen everywhere in the district, and a handful of girls who learned the basics from Judy and the others, went to work for the HIP shops, mass-producing tie-dyed items into a fashion that eventually spread throughout the country."¹¹⁷ The Diggers made tie-dye cool; the HIP merchants made tie-dye everywhere.

By 1971, commerce had saturated the counter culture movement in San Francisco. So a group of hippies set out east in a caravan. In Tennessee, they founded a commune called The Farm. With them they brought a lot of ideas and practices, including tie-dye. According to an artist who now sells tie-dyes on the internet under the name "Dyed in Vermont," a woman named Charlotte Gabriel developed the technique of applying several colors simultaneously with fiber-reactive dyes, and certain basics of folding the fabric, at The Farm. He and many others learned it and added their own innovations.¹¹⁸ Zahdan practices these same basic techniques, and the resulting patterns dominate contemporary tie-dye art in America.

In 1986, Greg, Tiffany and Mike had a little operation going in which they would hang their tie-dyes out on ropes at an abandoned gas station across the street from the university. They let Zahdan hang his tie-dyes with theirs. "They were very generous." On his first day, he sold every one. Soon after that he took a batch to a small festival in New Roads, near his home town in Point Coupee, and sold them along with the elephant garlic he'd been growing at his mother's place and some crochet work of Miranda's. Again, he sold every one. That summer, Miranda went to Berkley, California. Zahdan kept traveling around in the motor home, weatherizing houses, now with Greg as his helper, and selling tie-dyes.

¹¹⁶ Erin Weinger. "Tie-dye's Psychedelic History." *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 2008.

¹¹⁷ Grogan, 297.

¹¹⁸ "A Brief History of Tie-dye."

On Labor Day weekend of that year he sold tie-dyes out of his motor home on the beach in Freeport, Texas. They were so popular that he started making them right in the motor home and selling them still bound and damp. Over Halloween weekend he set up shop at the Westheimer Arts Festival in Houston and sold out.

That month, there had been a big earthquake in San Francisco, where Miranda was and, in other news, she had decided not to come back.

Zahdan was ready to get out of the weatherizing business. He says that Community Action had run its course, as bureaucracies tend to do, and besides, “I couldn’t keep doing the same thing without her.” He didn’t want to go back to Point Coupee, either. His father was gone and he’d turned the elephant garlic over to his sister, who had startled him by taking an interest in it. “Lorraine planted the elephant garlic? She’s never even walked off the concrete before.”

In February of 1990, he traveled to New Orleans during Mardi Gras to check out the French Market. He set up his tie-dye booth in half a space in the front lot for three hundred fifty dollars and parked his motor home in front of the market for ten dollars a week. “And Mardi Gras went well; I discovered I liked New Orleans.” Business was good. The tie-dyes sold almost as fast as he could make them.

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After he applies the dye, Zahdan stores the pieces in a plastic crate where they cure for twenty-four to thirty-six hours, molecules of dye latching on to molecules of cellulose in a permanent bond. . . .

Zahdan decided after Mardi Gras to stay New Orleans for a little while. He sold tie-dyes at the French Market and on a hill across from Jackson Square (until he got into trouble for selling on the street without a license.) His motor home, parked in front of the French Market, became a social gathering place that, in the evenings, tended to reek of incense and other smells that the incense supposedly masked. No one seemed to mind. That spring, he took his tie-dyes to Armstrong Park where an event was being held to commemorate the release of Nelson Mandela. He had made a Submergence, the folded-in-half spiral piece that curves upwards, forming the cauldron, which he had begun to see as feminine, water, and Yin.

“And so I dyed this Submergence like three kinds of yellow and black, and it’s hanging out there. And this is important to my continuing to do what I do because this is right after coming here. The spring was still cool. And I had no intention of staying in New Orleans. I didn’t yet really particularly like it.”

That day a woman walked up to his booth and saw the black and yellow Submergence hanging there and asked him, “Why did you make that shirt?”

“So that’s a really odd question, right?”

He replied flippily that he just needed something neon, something bright, on his line. She left and came back twenty or thirty minutes later.

“Well, what does it mean to you?” she asked.

So Zahdan, who studied Chinese philosophy in college, replied that he was a student of the I Ching and was making a hexagram. He had begun to draw correlations between making lines on fabric and the I Ching, he told her.

“And she gives me a really, really weird look. She walks away, she comes back again. She comes back again and she says, ‘Brother, I have no idea what you know, but in ancient Egypt, that design was called neon ting.’” She told him that, in ancient Egypt, that pattern had been made at the behest of the Pharaoh as an oracle.

“Now, I’m beginning to, like, have tingles because the first sentence I have with this woman I use the word ‘neon’ and one of the hexagrams in the I Ching is ‘ting’ and its symbol is the cauldron. And a Submergence has a resemblance [to a cauldron] because it has this horseshoe. And it’s exactly the image of a cauldron. So this is some really metaphysical shit.

“So I’m not decided to stay in New Orleans. I’m walking the streets at night, and suddenly I begin to have these fugues. Literally out of my body, I would be transported to some place that I had nothing to do with . . . I’m seeing myself in ancient Egypt, buried alive . . . Gradually I begin to realize what happened is that I’m--just the pressure of everything is on me. Typically, as an analyst, I made this up, but it explains it. Because what happened was Pharaoh had me do an oracle and he didn’t like it so he had me buried alive. That’s how they did ya if they didn’t like what you said. And that explains me and fabric avoiding each other for four thousand years, because it didn’t lead to good things.

“So now I’m tripping around New Orleans, and neon tings, and I’m a priest in ancient Egypt . . . It gave me a sense of what it was about. And this is where New Orleans comes in because New Orleans perfectly lines up with the plane of Giza. We’re thirty degrees North Latitude. I’m standing on the same latitude as where I did this four thousand years ago.”

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When the tie-dyes have finished curing, he takes them out to the shed, where he performs the “drain dance.”

The tie-dyes have to be rinsed thoroughly with cold water in order to wash away the excess dye. Zahdan accomplishes this with two washing machines. He first fills both machines with water, submerges the load of fabric in one, then agitates it for five minutes. When the machine goes to spin, he pours buckets of water into it. Then he moves the load to the second machine while the first fills up with water again and repeats the process a few times. When that’s done, in the dryer they go, then on the French Market to find their way into the world.

It’s raining out. On the television in the corner of the workshop, congressmen are debating the Stimulus Bill, orating in turn about jobs and mortgages in grave, angry tones. They’re arguing over who deserves money from the government and what money should be spent for. High-speed trains? Toxic assets? Green collar jobs? One congresswoman pleads on behalf of the automakers, speaking of an industry that is “on its knees” and the desperation of laid-off autoworkers.

Zahdan hasn’t punched a clock since 1980. He claims to be unemployable.

“So, it’s steady at fightin’ that fabric. I win every battle, but it’s the war that I can’t win.”

The Diggers never did win the war. Zahdan, he reckons he’s been fighting for four thousand years.

Greg points out that New Orleans is on the same longitude as pyramids that were discovered in South America. I raise my eyebrows and nod, internally debating my belief in the significance. Most of us want to think that there is a reason that we are where we are doing what we are doing. Zahdan believes he is here to make stories. Each tie-dye is a story. Each has a destiny. “They have a life of their own. I joke with people at the market. It’s like, they’re all imminently adoptable. They’re my kids. They’re well behaved. Please take one home with you.

“I guess at some point you have to be a merchant, too. I remember in college lambasting the whole concept of consumer mercantilism and here I am now a fucking mercantiler. Making shit for people to sell to them that they don’t need. This is our problem in the world today. We waste all our energy on stuff that’s just stuff. If I gotta sell something at least I make it. They’ll be here when I’m gone.”

Greg says, “People will show up at the market and say, ‘Hey. Where’s that guy who sells tie-dyes?’”

“And I can answer that question,” Zahdan says, “most days.”

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