

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE IN A CHRYSLER (My trip to Newfoundland)

First Day

The greatest challenge in going on an adventure is actually getting out of the house. I won't describe how I got all the little chores done. Too boring. The next greatest challenge is getting on the airplane. This I managed with assistance. A nice lady in a uniform helped me punch the little buttons to get a boarding pass in flash and then a handsome guard directed me to a security check with no line and when I lost the boarding pass, in all the unpacking and undressing - to prove I was not 'with bomb' - another nice one in a blue costume at a brown desk printed me an extra. Maybe it helps to limp a bit, which I do, because my knee hurt. At the other end things went smoothly. I had the de-coder for my rental car before my bag came out of luggage cave. The Chrysler started by pushing a button!

After a seven am departure I was by three o'clock Toronto time in a very scruffy fishing village, Trout River, just south of Gros Morne National Park, real fishing boats and falling-over fish shacks and convenience stores with lights so dim you can't find the candy bars and attendants so cheery, who cared.

It is astonishingly easy to get to, this wonderland. Clean air. It makes no sense to say you can smell 'clean' but you can. No artists, thank the gods, unless you count the knitters of colorful socks strung on a few clothes lines down the main street. There was a board walk for the tourist just three seasons shy of rotting away and falling to the rocky beach below. And the ocean, there is lots of it, which is a very good thing because the ocean is huge this trip.

There was a lighthouse way down the bay, a stubby little affair on pylons, not my type, but still, there must be a lighthouse if there is an ocean, especially if the ocean is huge. I recalled you are supposed to row to the lighthouse with your grumpy father one day, for reasons never clear and learn something mysterious and come back wiser and write a book. I did set out from Toronto to go 'to the lighthouse', albeit in a push-button Chrysler, but I had in mind something grander, not to this pathetic little blinker. Tomorrow, further down the road, we will find him. And leave the grumpy father far behind.

I can't say there are no tourists. There were eight tables of us in Trout River's best restaurant, the Seaside Restaurant. 'Reviewed in the NYT' it says on the sandwich board outside. Just like last year, all over Tofino. Coast-to-coast - 'Reviewed in the New York Times'! They know my country better than I!

Seaside was a clean and wholesome family restaurant the likes of which have been driven out of downtown Toronto but which I can still find in rural Pennsylvania. Wickinnish Inn, Tofino, British Columbia, it was not, thank goodness. It featured a mash potato-dill pickle suspension bridge over a river of lobster sauce. 'Too beautiful to eat', said the Times. Smashing it to a pulp gave me a infinite satisfaction. (If the chef's mother had stressed more firmly, 'don't play with your food', who knows, perhaps the plague of food faddists might never have come to our land. I found myself wondering, who came first, the Vikings or the New York foodies. In any event the Vikings were driven away - hurray for the indigenous peoples. Not good about the smallpox. But the foodies, unfortunately, were vaccinated before they arrived. It's going to be a long struggle. Anyhow, the good news is ... the cod are not gone! They're for dinner in every restaurant. And the bad news is, in case you have forgotten, fresh cod is utterly tasteless.

One bad was the dumpy - albeit well kitted out - little cabin I was sent to sleep in last night, at the very end of the last, last road through town, bending back into the bush, far, far from the sea. With a noisy fridge. Not even a moose.

Second Day

My bum knee has kept from hiking around in Gros Morne today as I might have but it is feeling better than a week ago. And now I rest in a very un-handsome converted motel, the Bonne Bay Inn, in the next town on my itinerary, Woody Point on - Bonne Bay. Un-handsome on the outside but very handsome inside, with a great view from the bar, dining room *and from my very comfortable bed*. Bar snacks were a good supper. The owner and the bar tender were good talkers.

This town was noticeably more prosperous than Trout River, meaning several two story, 'painted ladies' with Victorian verandas and gothic gables. Two restaurants. The one I lunched in would not interest the restaurant critics, even as canon fodder. But it is mostly unspoiled, just beginning to feel the tourist lash. There is none of the *faux grandeur* of Fogo hotels for artists and billionaires. Hereabouts new siding is fab and fresh paint the acme of elegance.

Bonne, the Bay is lovely. The driving around Gros Morne is spectacular. And I'm still at the south end. On to the north cape tomorrow, the whales and icebergs and the grander, better sort of lighthouse, further down the road.

What a great country.

Third Day

Today I drove north through Gros Morne National Park to the famous Western Arm 'fjord'. It is a fresh water lake that was once a real fjord off the ocean and is now a mile inland from the sea. It was a decent hike from the parking lot to get to the little tour boat, which took the tourists on a cruise down the lake canyon, beneath the cliffs, some two thousand feet. Impressive. This was the only spot so far where I have found a crowd, gee, maybe a hundred lined up for the two boats. And this night I stayed in Rocky Harbor. This town was tourist central for the mid-coast, six or seven restaurants and a small hotel. My B&B was satisfactory but no breakfast. The town sprawled along the roads in the typical manner of rural places where the principle intensification is unheard of. I was told Woody Point and Rocky Harbor were now getting seasonal cottagers. I noted a number of 'no vacancy' signs for the B&B's. One tour bus. But still the area seems overwhelming local and working class, fishers. The end of June is prime tourist season, for whales and icebergs. I am crazy but not uniquely so.

Fourth Day

The road north, Highway 430, The Viking Trail, to St. Anthony and Quirpon, (pronounced car - POON), is long and mostly straight even as it rises and falls up and down the ridges and valleys. There are many crests and stretches where you can see for several miles. It often runs right along the shore and so close to the ocean side the vista seems to run off the shore float off into the sea. Mostly what you see is mile after mile of forlorn rocky beach. Inland from the coast the trees are shrunk, shriveled and very densely tangled, impassable which they call Tuckamore. In many places there is nothing but low brush or bog. On the land side there were fields of stacked cords of wood, freshly cut and ready for the winter, strange and worrisome in the last week of June. The image is striking, beside the highway, miles from any visible settlement. What do they know that I don't.

But there are more villages around the coves and bays as you drive north up the coast, modest but tidy, mainly new prefabs or fresh and colorful siding. Houses on the barren landscape with no surrounding trees or shrubs seem strange to an Ontario eye. There are many churches but none with steeples. The brightest establishments along the way, if that is the right word - I passed was a fresh painted and picture perfect small graveyard of the merely dead. The highway shops, on the other hand, were grim and barely functional.

Radio reception faded. The driving was alternately mindless and glorious, but without regret, or options. I am going to the lighthouse. The highway traffic was sparse. Many more vehicles were traveling south, fleeing in convoys, from what they did not say or

signal. Going north there were few of us, mainly pickups, meaning trucks. We too traveled north in packs, for protection, from, from, the moose, who took their own sweet time crossing the highway. But in time my pickup companions deserted me, peeling off, left and right, into the villages. I was left alone on the highway to make my rendezvous at Quirpon. The highway itself, once broad and smooth, now became broken and rough, eroded at the edges where the northern rains and ice worked fearlessly and not slowly, to rid the land of the asphalt footprint of the invader.

Forlorn and desolate is strangely beautiful because it clears the view for the sea and the sky to meet. And while the clouds were low the horizon out to sea and up ahead was crisp, clear and never in doubt. Horizon is the crack in the world. And my lighthouse is a telescope to search the far distance for any signs of a clue to a hint of an answer to a question I have forgotten but might remember when I get there.

The last highway food on the narrow road to the far north bought out the inner foodie in me. 'Do you have anything other than Cheetos?' and I momentarily regretted my disparagement of the brave food critics. I had never read of Jack's Convenience and Diesel Gas in the Times. Which is why, I confess and regret, I stopped there. But my belief is at least one made it here and was killed as she tried to tweet a warning about the tuna salad at Jack's Convenience and Diesel Gas. There is, if you go round back to pee, a suspicious mound of rocks in the shape of a grave with curious bits of cellophane stained with honey mustard.

More miles north, now to the remains of the Viking settlement, l'Anse aux Meadows. I stopped for a while. Very grim. Eventually these Scandinavian invaders were driven off by the native Indians who thought, it is legend, that the IKEA bedroom sets were too frail and hard to assemble. A fake – reconstructed – settlement has been erected to show how the Vikings lived, sod huts, porridge pots, etc. My dreary cabin in Trout River had higher ceilings, flat walls and baseboard heaters. I will never complain again.

And, finally, a long back road to the left lead to a deserted pier, where I waited for my ferryman, my Charon, to take me to the other side. I could see Quirpon Island across the bay, a blackish mound, a hulk, rising from the sea, a hump without trees nor visible signs of life, nor the lighthouse Inn that was my destiny. And further out on the dark sea lay, several white and craggy, somnambulant brutes, menacing, beckoning. I locked my past life in the Chrysler and readied myself for the passage. There were others on the pier, drawn by their own private demons or angels. Finally, at the appointed hour, Charon's assistant, one Ahab, arrived. (pronounced A – hab) announced himself. He was an odd but commanding fellow, who directed us to the very edge of the pier where we were herded

into his Zodiac for the crossing. There were no oars to pull nor sails to trim, only a large outboard motor and the cold splash of the sea.

The passage was indeed rough and wet and much longer than I expected. We sped past the silent white brutes, who seemed not to notice Ahab, nor he them. "Plenty more of those buggers 'morrow mornin', folks," shouted Ahab, laughing and laughing. Strange, I thought, and probably good. Whom ever it was, Ahab had had the benefit of a first-class anger-management therapist. i

Soon enough my lighthouse hove into view high on Cape Bauld. Ahab put us ashore in a sheltered cove and we climbed the hill on a faint trail in and around the bog, puddles and rocks, not steep, but eventually high, to the lighthouse atop the Cape. There was no vegetation anywhere higher than my knee. And from the high point the North Atlantic from Labrador to Ireland, was spread before us, cold and rough, wet and waiting.

Day Five

My lighthouse stood extremely tall above the sea but he was in fact rather short, in measured feet - for his age and era, but powerfully built and given the great height of his perch he was totally awesome. But I confess I was strangely disappointing in that it seemed he wanted and needed nothing at least from me. If that was the question, it wasn't much of an answer at \$210 per diem. Ahab's brother-in-law, Angus, (pronounced ANG-guss) told us that the lighthouse no longer had a functioning fog horn. It was totally decommission two years ago when it would not stop blasting. That would have been a sad day. Which is to say, he wasn't talking. And the flashing light, Angus said, is virtually irrelevant in the age of digital and radio communication. But still he blinks steadily, in case of possible emergency. There is a helicopter landing pad for the coast guard to drop in for maintenance of the light. In the Second War the site was a busy and important listening post in the Battle of the North Atlantic. But nothing left of that but concrete block foundations buried in moss.

But, never mind, he is great to look at. He is white with red trim and red door. The nearby keeper's house, the Inn, is white with red trim. It is in fact two houses stuck together, side-by-side. The out buildings are white with red trim. The flag is white with red trim. He is in every way perfect. Except about the fog horn.

Inside the Inn, it is mainly stained tongue-in-grove cedar, linoleum and painted floors, refreshed but not changed from the earliest days. The windows have lace curtains. Inside everything is perfect, perfect.

In the sitting room the strangers come and go, talking of their travels. The room is filled with guidebooks and numerous Newfoundland folk books. If a Newfoundlander spends two nights in the brush, or the boat takes a bucket over the transom, or leaks in any way, he or she writes a book about it. I expected more foreigners, there are some, but the crowd is mainly Canadian. Almost everyone was of that certain age – 'J.B.F.A.' – 'just before falling apart.' The conversation is polite, as typical among travelers, mostly about 'my last trip', my best photo, lost luggage, etc. I travel a lot and can usually hold my own but there are always several in such gatherings who had been on more wilderness adventures than I. Birders are hard to beat. Nobody asks 'what you do' although they do seem to want me assure them I am 'retired' and therefore harmless.

In four days there were only two families with children in tow and in one of those, the youngest man child was twenty years. That dad was a cool and collected Alpha, with a family totally and happily under his command. Instructor of Customs and Police officers in arrest techniques. A martial arts instructor. Dives in a shark cage. Perfect photographs, perfectly catalogued. Very pretty family. Perfectly mannered. The twenty-year old was exceedingly handsome and well spoken - on the subject of skateboarding.

The long dining table had two sittings each night, ten each sitting. The first night was pot roast, the second salmon loaf and fresh cod the third, mashed potatoes and carrots every night and grandma deserts, e.g. peanut butter cheesecake and six kinds of jam for breakfast on homemade white bread toast and molasses cookies for snacks. The inside staff were all central-casting, Newfie-grandma, perfect. It was the best of everything in the best of all possible worlds. Unless, of course, you are NYT food critic. But we are safe. The island is limo-proof. The Financial Times has been here however they're English and came for the remoteness, not the food.

The second and third days at the Inn were cold and rainy. There was some visibility but no whales visible, at least to me. However it was not too cold and rainy to keep us in our rooms or hunched over the cribbage board around the baseboard heater.

The second afternoon the rainy was off-and-on. Ahab was off-island – meeting with his accountant in Cornerbrook - so Angus took us out hunting whales and their *genus nexus*, the Iceberg, in the Zodiac. Whales can and do hide but not icebergs, one of which, our Moby for the day, was stuck on a reef off the Cape, the sorry consequence of the silencing of the fog horn. He was about two years old, almost three, and was heading south for Quebec City. This means, give or take a few months, he was two years gone from Mom, the great glacier of Greenland. He strained and groaned as we approached but could not get loose. The waves had been at work on him for several weeks but with little effect except slight erosion at sea level. We circled, first at a distance, then closer till we could see the

radiant blue of his ancient ice in the eroded underbelly, glaring brilliant cobalt blue, even in the faint and foggy light. Angus said it was the first time the sea had allowed him to come so close to this beast so perhaps we were the first humans he had seen. Up top the warmer weather had left many scars and crevices on his back in wildly twisted forms and crevices. These wounds were wondrously pretty - curse me for saying so - more beautiful in his torture than ... than ... anything man has carved.

We made another circuit. How much larger he was than what I thought from shore, two or three storeys, many-sides, all different. One corner was a perfect ramming prow, another side a smoothed curve like a beach rock, another like the fragmented wreck of a collapsed building and another, still, a wild jungle of eroded crevices, some curvy and drooping like a collapsing blossom, some plunging like a gorge.

Finally, on Angus' signal, we attacked with all our force, throwing at him our mightiest weapons, a 75-to-250mm Pentax zoom, a 300 mil Canon, an underwater mini-cam, as well as a barrage of small arms fire from half a dozen hand-held I-Phone stealth cameras. Angus egged us on, as round as round the beast we circled, firing wildly. I hit him, I am sure, square in his glaring-back blue ice. He and I, mano-mano. I shot over and over again. He did not blink or flinch. I felt no guilt for our frenzy, nor do I now, thinking back on our orgy. Our task was life itself, to bring back the scared treasures is light the dull hall frames to fire the imagination through the long city winter of the soul.

Moby, the ice berg, was more than brave and noble, he was oblivious. In fact, as we pulled away I wondered briefly if he was even noticed. The next day when I looked out, there he was, with no sign of injury, with his 'fuck-you' sneer. Whatever he brought from the ancient ice of primordial Greenland he still had. Whatever we took, thinking we stole, he still had, indeed he had more, more than we could ever steal, capture, borrow or buy. More logically - something I hate when I travel - it must be that we stole nothing. He gave us everything and nothing.

The next day I left the island. Like Columbus taking his captured natives back to the Court of Isabella and Ferdinand on his puny ships, we sail back to the mainland and fly back to our homes with our captured images. To gasp and coo and ponder. 'What have we here? What have we here?' Yes, What? What. Our behemoth remained, slowly to dissolve his secret to the sea. Which knows all and tells nothing. And so we came and went to the lighthouse, in the cold and rain for reasons that were never clear, waged our war, and receive a gift and learn something wondrous that I don't understand but love a lot.

What a great country.

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My last night at the Inn was raining and foggy. After the last Zodiac arrived and the sitting room filled up with baffled strangers, we were warm and safe gathered round the space heaters, safe from invaders and waiting for supper. Everything was perfect all over again. Jig's Supper tonight, the most classic of all Newfoundland out port meals, one no restaurant would serve.

Jig's Supper consists of the worst cuts of imported salted beef, plus, plus. The meat is soaked for hours to try to get out some of the curing salt and then the veg is cooked in the same broth at the same time, whatever is left in the root cellar, typically fat carrots, turnip, potatoes, cabbage and beans (yellow) soaked and mashed together in a paste. This is 'home brew', so to speak, each kitchen is different, how often they change the water in the pot, if at all, or merely freshen it with tap or sea water, or Screech. The veg and meat scraps are served up separately, buffet style in the kitchen, garnished with imported salt and pepper and sweet pickles. Jig's supper has that great Newfoundland virtue, like the best fresh cod, everything is virtually tasteless, which is to say it tastes clean, which is not a logical or complementary adjective, except in Newfoundland. And to top it off a boiled dumpling, from the same pot, smothered in fresh molasses! The most perfect of Newfoundland in the more perfect of places.

The cooks waited to seat us and see our reaction. I conjured my best whale-busting appetite and bellied up, ready to eat hearty. If not a whale I had at least shot an iceberg. But just as our small group was heading for the table we heard a deafening roar overhead, the furious beating of a thousand wings, or something worse, clearly 'from away'. It was quite frightening. Then I saw faintly, on the landing pad, a helicopter setting down, even in the fog. A man and a woman were assisted out onto the pad. She was mere waif of a woman, in sensible Dennis Fong low heels, a black Donna Karimzi tailored pant suit and a silk bib by Dodo and a billowing Barbery rain shawl swirling in the cross-currents of the helicopter downdraft and a sou-easter blowing in from Ireland. He wore Ralph Lauren cargo pants so tight the pockets could never hold a wallet and a very, very full cut Scottish crofters' tweed jacket, appropriate to cover his professional belly. The Times food critics!

It's not a long walk from the helicopter pad to the keeper's house and we waited. Shortly the door opened slowly.

"Reservation for two. Under Piepuss."

"No reserves here, darlin'," says Madonna, "but we's can sit anudder two down der at the end, if dos folks squeezes a bit."

And squeezed we did, because we are so polite, which is why Canada is your best friend and you don't even know it.

"Jig's supper, folks. Help yorselves in the kitchen." And in we went, to the sacred stove.

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Reservations at the Long Table are simply impossible to come but we were extremely lucky to be seated as extras with a group of 'locals', Canadians from Ontario, which is just north of Niagara Falls.. They are a famously polite people but once you get to know them a little, as we did, you learn they are proud of their land and no more boring than people from Philadelphia and very proud of their desolate country. One, who spoke excellent English, translated between us, and the chief chef, Monica. Monica was raised in the out ports and her recipe for boiled turnips a family secret passed down for generations. It is still a secret, despite my best efforts. Bless her.

'Locally sourced?' I asked.

'Nuttin' grow here, darlin', she teased, 'cept the fishes. And they's for tomorrow. Turnips is best in February. Is when it's all wes eat.'

The carrots were exceptional, orange in color, unknown in Manhattan, (I have seen orange in corner stores in Queens and on Staten Island) instead of the purple and red of our local heirloom variety. They had a rare mushy texture and were served with a quaint, oily kind of butter from a polyurethane tub - and topped with (alas, imported) salt and pepper.

But never mind the carrots! The turnips are to die for! The Canadians, famously, hide their emotions. But I could tell, by the faint flush of cheek, they were as overwhelmed as I. ("Turnips. Again!" they muttered, so quietly, so polite.)

Their salted beef is similar to our corned beef. Imagine not-so-tender flesh, from a scrawny Canadian cow, a few strands of flesh clinging, desperately and barely, to rubbery bones. The meaty, but slight flesh is easily ripped off with the teeth. Pure delight. The Canadians at our table told us their cows can graze north of the Article Circle all winter, feeding on the second growth cedar sprouts and black flies, now growing and buzzing year round, in the ever-warming tundra. (A Toronto broker offered to sell us acreage.) They, the cows, ride south, on the ice flows, drinking sea water - hence the faint salty taste - and are harvested by the Newfoundland fishers on their days-off, from the cod. True, 'locally sourced food'. We have so much to learn from our northern friends.

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In the last hour of the last day of my time at the lighthouse I was waiting down in the cove by the white boathouse with red trim, for Angus, or Charon, if he was working that day - not fussy who - for my return crossing. The mist had lifted slightly and the bay was clear enough. And who should come for me, not Angus or Ahab, but the whales. A pair and then a small pod, snorting and blowing, undulating across the surface of the bay like giant snakes in tall grass, slowly and most graceful, random, each sighting but a moment, a kind of Where's Waldo in the ocean. The gulls swarmed and dove. The krill were invisible to us beneath the surface but not the birds and, presumably, delicious to the big guys. Do whale think 'delicious'? Or am I projecting? In any event the krill are pretty stupid, swimming into the bay by the lighthouse, year after year and whales line up for a quick and easy breakfast, the Tim Horton's of the North Atlantic, flashing lights and white with red trim. Explain that to the lady in the Donna Karimzi tailored pants suit.

Angus came and we were loaded and transported back to where we came. The whales followed us to the distant shore and then to an even larger pod. And we departed to even more distant places with our memory cards, in our zoom-zoom cars and rear view mirrors.

What a great country.

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The road south was the same, only backwards and rainy. One overnight stop and two meals in a certain 'hotel' restaurant. How can *lobster* be tasteless? Since when were 'home fries' diced and deep fried 'French' fries and scrambled eggs mainly sawdust and ? Oh, Donna, oh ... where are you when we really need you!