

My Turkey

(A Brief History of Canadian-American Relations)

I never met anyone who was born right next to the Grand Canyon or Mount Everest or the Great Barrier Reef or any of the other “spectacular natural wonders” of the world, but if I did I’d like to ask them if people always say the same thing to them that they say to me: “Oh, that’s interesting, but I didn’t realize that people actually *live* there.”

So I wasn’t surprised at all when Kimsu said it too. Kimsu was from Seoul, South Korea. She came to Wayne State University in Detroit to study political science and nuclear medicine. I came to muddle through a vaguely defined liberal arts program. We met in World Music Appreciation 220. She was rounding out her requirement for credit hours in the humanities. I took the course because one of my roommates said it was “a piece of cake.”

We were listening to Javanese gamelan music when I approached her. I made up a question about polyrhythms, hoping I would sound bright and sensitive. We got to talking. She asked me where I was from. I said Niagara Falls and she said what everybody says: “I didn’t know people actually live there.”

“They don’t anymore.” I said. “I mean, there are still about 50,000 residents there but I’m not sure what they do could be called ‘living’.”

“Niagara Falls is on my list of places to see in America.” She said.

“I’ll take you there,” I offered. “I know the city like the back of my hand. I can show you things the tourist guides don’t even know about.”

I could give her the whole picture, not just the post card image. I’d give her slice o’ life, *cinema verite*. Niagara Falls: from Honeymoon Capital of the World to Chernobyl of the Empire State in 50

Dismal Years!

Kimsu looked hesitant. Maybe she thought I had ulterior motives, that my offer to show her Niagara Falls was a ruse to check into a cheap motel with her: The Thundering Waters—“Free Jacuzzi, Continental Breakfast, Satellite TV!” She didn’t hop right into my Gremlin so I thought I’d hang back, play it cool.

Several conversations later we were talking about families. She asked if I had any pictures of mine. I didn’t, so I had my mother mail a few snapshots. Specifically, I’d asked for ones showing the Falls in the background. In a few weeks I shared them with Kimsu. One shot had me sandwiched between two brothers—three little stooges posing on the Goat Island bridge. Another photo showed my mother at Prospect Point; she was hoisting me up on her shoulder, I was probably two years old. The family Joke was that Mom was tempted to toss me over the brink.

“Your mother looks very nice,” Kimsu said.

“She is,” I agreed, “you’d like her.”

Maybe I can thank my mother for persuading Kimsu that it would be okay to drive with me to Niagara Falls for the weekend.

From Detroit, the quickest way to Niagara Falls is through southern Ontario. Kimsu was perplexed over this geographical anomaly.

“You mean we go through another country to get to a different state in your own country?”

It did sound strange, I admitted, so I showed her an atlas prove my point. The closer we came to the border the more anxious Kimsu appeared. She rummaged through her backpack, nervously fingering her passport.

“My passport picture looks awful,” she said. “Does yours look bad too?”

“Me? I don’t have a passport.”

“How can you get into Canada without a passport?”¹

“It’s only Canada,” I said. “It’s not China or Iraq.”

“I think we better take the long way,” she whispered, “through the States.”

“Relax,” I said. “I’ve been to Canada a million times without a passport.”

Once we tunneled under the Detroit River and passed through Windsor without a hitch, she explained. All her life she’d heard stories about Koreans crossing the border between north and south and simply disappearing. Hearing her tales of rape, torture, mutilation and execution made my childhood bogeymen seem silly.

Along the flat, uneventful stretch of 401 east of London, Ontario, Kimsu fell asleep. When she woke I was on Lundy’s Lane in Niagara Falls, Ontario, searching for a gas station. Lundy’s Lane at this point is a smear of Pizza Huts, McDonald’s, 7-Elevens, Speedy Muffler Shops and Blockbuster Video outlets.

“Here we are,” I said.

“*This* is Niagara Falls?” She asked doubtfully.

“Yeah, it’s part of the city.”

Kimsu looked dejected. “I thought Niagara Falls was beautiful.”

“It is. You’ll see. We’ll check out the Canadian side first,” I said. “No visit to Niagara Falls is complete without seeing Clifton Hill.”

Right there in front of us was the awesome grandeur of the Horseshoe Falls. I couldn’t count the times I’ve seen it, yet it never fails to astonish. Roaring magnificently, its plume of mist floated up into the sunny sky, crowned by the fabled rainbow.

Right behind us was Clifton Hill, a dizzying midway of garish billboards, flashing lights, neon

signs, and amusement park gimcrackery presided over by a phalanx of Oz-like towers. Balanced on a wire slung over the thoroughfare is the legendary tightrope walker, Blondin, in clumsy statue form. Cruel winters and acid mist from the Falls have dulled his paint. Plaster crumbles off his shabby tunic.

Above the sidewalk loudspeakers promise “The biggest, the tallest, the fastest, the heaviest, the best, the richest—it’s all here at the Guinness World Records Museum!” Beyond the red velvet ropes leading up to the foyer, a cadaverous Elvis beckons the bored and curious into Louis Tussaud’s Waxworks.

Up the hill at the House of Frankenstein, another hawker competes with the pop music blaring from the storefronts: “Beware—beyond these walls is a nightmare so horrifying, so macabre it will make your flesh crawl. . . .”

Between Guinness and Frankenstein lies a carnival-like spectacle: Count Dracula’s Haunted Castle, Ripley’s Believe It or Not Museum, Adventure Dome, Movieland Wax Museum, Houdini Magical Hall of Fame, Circus World, Dazzleland Family Fun Center, Dinosaur Park Miniature Golf. Presiding over all at the top of the hill is The JFK Assassination Exhibit & Resource Centre.

“I had no idea it would be like this,” Kimsu shouted to be heard above the noise.

“What did you think it would be like?”

“I don’t know. More like the Grand Canyon, or that big waterfalls in South America—Angel Falls?”

I had to laugh. “Disappointed?”

She didn’t answer, just smiled—a smile that looked more polite than heartfelt.

“Okay,” I said, “I’ll show you something really beautiful.”

We got in the car and drove to Queenston Heights. There’s an overlook above the hamlet of Queenston, perched on the brink of the Niagara escarpment. From up there you get one of the best

river views. Beyond the escarpment's sudden drop-off the lowland spreads north, west and east in a great green plane. Winding through this plane is the lower Niagara River, looking lazy but hiding tricky currents beneath her calm face.

Towering behind us was Brock's monument, a soaring tower commanding the view from the ridge. Kimsu asked who Brock was and what his monument stood for.

"He was some guy," I said, "some big war guy or something." I had a vague sense that the monument had something to do with the War of 1812 or possibly the French and Indian Wars or maybe the Upper Canada Rebellion but I wasn't sure.

One memory of Brock's monument, a moment from my own history, suddenly came to me. Looking up at the tower I recalled being ten or eleven years old. My friend Tino got it into his head that Brock's monument could be the ultimate water balloon launching site. If we smuggled water balloons up there we could hurl them from the top and make monster splashes on the tourists below.

With stealth we rode our bicycles across the bridge. Passing through Customs we sweated every second as if balloon possession was a class-1 felony. At the foot of the monument we crowded around a drinking fountain, conspiratorially loading our "weapons."

After a dizzying climb up the spiral staircase we finally gained the top. But when we looked up our hearts sank. The only openings in the stone wall were two or three tiny portholes not much larger than a softball. Worse, they were covered with a mesh screen. We didn't even get to see the view from up there—both of us were too short to reach the portholes. So we hung our heads in defeat and trudged back down the stairs, an ignominious defeat to what started as a brilliant campaign.

What happened to General Brock at the Battle of Queenston Heights I had no idea. But the fate of our failed attack was as clear to me as yesterday.

"Next," I said, like an official guide, "is Niagara-on-the-Lake. It's really quaint. Women love it.

You can buy some peach preserves there.”

Any female I'd ever taken to Niagara-on-the-Lake went all gooey over the precious little shops along Queen Street: the 19th century style apothecary, bakeries and gift shops full of the fruit belt's finest honey, preserves, marmalades and confections.

Kimsu, however, seemed more interested in the town's British touches: union Jacks billowing on the balustrade of the Prince of Wales Hotel, a bell tower in the middle of the village green, street names honoring queens, princes and princesses. Near Fort George, placards announced the celebration of past glory: “Travel back in time to witness Her Majesty's Royal Redcoats foil the rabble-rousing Yanks in a battle that kept Canada united under the Crown.” Kimsu had plenty of questions about Loyalists, Rebels, French missionaries and Iroquois Indians, but my answers, I'm afraid, only confused her.

“Before, you said the Indians helped the French fight the British. Then you said the Indians helped the British fight the Americans.” She said.

“Well, the Indians kept switching sides. Sometimes they fought for the Americans too. I guess it depends when and where and who they were fighting.” The paucity of my answer resounded in my head, an embarrassment to both of us.

I was getting hungry. It was late afternoon and my mother was expecting us so I decided to cross over to the American side. When I pulled up in front of the house I saw the powder blue Oldsmobile Royale parked in the driveway. It belonged to my mother's friend, Rosa Petty.

As I introduced Kimsu, Rosa looked distressed. I had a pretty good idea what Rosa was thinking because I'd heard her spiel so many times before. Rosa had a gripe against every ethnic and racial group apart from her own.

“Italians,” Rosa would snipe, “are always hanging their disgusting underwear out in the backyard . . . Chinese yammer away in that mumbo jumbo you can’t understand . . . Pollocks stink up the alley with their foul cabbage . . . and Jews parade down the street every Saturday wearing those stupid hats of theirs.”

I took a secret pleasure in the irony of Rosa’s name: Petty. I couldn’t have branded her with a more telling name. I never understood what my mother saw in her. In every way they seemed opposites. But they worked together so they had that in common. Really, I think my mother just didn’t have it in her to tell Rosa to piss off. Anyway, when I was seventeen I told my mother she couldn’t choose my friends, so in fairness I couldn’t choose hers.

Soon enough, Rosa started in on Canadians: “They come over here and buy up all our food and gas. Half the time I go to get something they’re out of it ’cause the Canadians bought it all up.”

Rosa had no clue that her city desperately needed those Canadian “loonies.” Cross-border shopping was about the only thing keeping Niagara Falls, New York alive. Unplug the lifeline of Canadian money and the city would sink into the black hole of financial ruin.

“You go to the mall these days and it’s impossible to find a parking space.” Rosa complained. “Nine out of ten license plates are Canadian. They’ve got their own malls, why don’t they stay where they belong?”

Rosa was making me nervous. Any minute I feared she might start bashing Koreans too. After coffee and sandwiches I made up an excuse: “Hate to eat and run but Kimsu wants to see the sights before it gets dark.”

We drove to Lewiston, then up the River Road to Youngstown. This seven- or eight-mile stretch of river is Niagara at her most serene. Her proud breadth and languorous meandering to Lake Ontario bring to mind other great American rivers: the Ohio, the Missouri, even the mighty Mississippi’.

At the mouth of the river, where she empties into Lake Ontario, sits Old Fort Niagara. I pointed out to Kimsu that right across the river and upstream on the Canadian side is Fort George where we had walked just a few hours earlier. Aside from its scenic location, Fort Niagara offers a theatrical backdrop rich in history of which I remained shamefully ignorant.

For a few bucks you can go in and see *tableaux vivants* demonstrating 18th century garrison life. Actors—mostly college kids on summer vacation—dressed in baggy blouses and leather jerkins march around carrying bayoneted rifles. Reenactments of key battles are staged, complete with muskets popping, cannons thundering and reveille trumpeting over the battlements. It was a show I thrilled to as a kid. The historical significance flew right by me but the exploding ordnance, realistic uniforms and not-so-realistic stage blood were well worth the long bike ride out there.

What I really loved was when both Canada and the U.S. orchestrated the complete battle reenactment. Then, blasting from both sides of the river, the artillery fire climaxed in a ten-year old's fantasy—an orgiastic crescendo of mock destruction!

Nostalgia beckoned but I didn't feel like paying for two adult admission tickets. So we just walked around and I pointed things out. The parking lot recalled high school days, pulling up to the edge and gazing across the lake all the way to Toronto's skyline twinkling on the north shore. I came within inches of losing my cherry in that very lot when a park ranger sneaked up and shone his flashlight on my eager soldier.

Kimsu was reading all the blue and yellow historical markers. Whenever she asked a question about some battle or general or warship, I had to shrug my shoulders and expose my ignorance.

"I thought you grew up here." She said.

"I did, but, well, you know how kids are."

Sunday night I dropped Kimsu off at her dorm. I told her that, apart from Rosa's tirade, I had a great weekend. She looked exhausted. After the culture shock of Clifton Hill and Love Canal, who wouldn't be? So I said goodnight, then drove home.

Until that weekend with Kimsu, no one had ever made me feel so stupid about my hometown. Not that she was trying. It's just that she asked so many questions that none of my American or Canadian friends ever had. I was afraid she'd write me off as just another dumb Yankee. That's when I decided to go to the library and make myself a little less ignorant.

I should have done my reading before our visit. That way, when Kimsu looked deflated at Clifton Hill's tacky over-development, I could have told her that its huckster roots go way back. In 1866, Saul Davis ran the Table Rock Hotel right near the foot of Clifton Hill. He made his money by luring the curious into his dubious enterprise. Drawn by promises of spectacular views, visitors were forced to pay exorbitant fees simply to be released. Saul's son Edward, threatened a professor from New York, saying, "You Goddamned American sons of bitches, you can't move from here till you pay every cent." A Manhattan visitor who refused to pony up to Davis's extortion was hurled through a glass door.

Just down the road was Lundy's Lane, now an eyesore of commercial development: squat, graceless buildings thrown up to make a quick buck. This is the same site that one book described as "the bloodiest, most dogged struggle of the campaign in Upper Canada." On the very ground where soldiers once spilled their blood in the name of the Crown sat an ugly cinder block rectangle with a lurid neon sign flashing out front: "Live Nude XXX Ultra Vixens! Come As U R!"

When Kimsu asked me about General Brock's monument I offered nothing but silly memories of water balloon fights. In fact, American militia killed Brock in a sneak attack on October 13, 1812. The British retaliated with a classic move of psychological warfare. Fierce native warriors fighting for

the British led the counterattack, ambushing the Americans and terrifying them with their mad war cries. In less than an hour, the natives and British troops had killed over 200 and captured more than 900 Americans.

To me, Fort Niagara was a Disneyesque theme park; so it was hard to imagine the carnage that had actually taken place there. According to one book, in a May, 1813 raid upon Fort George, the Americans “fired round cast iron shot, red hot shot, exploding bombs and incendiary carcasses.” (What the hell were “incendiary carcasses”? I pictured flaming cows, burning oxen and smoking goats flying across the river in great arcs, hurled by giant catapults in Youngstown.)

Even Niagara-on-the-Lake, with its precious little sweet shops and well-heeled theatre crowd was once the site of brutal terrorism. In December, 1813 Niagara-on-the-Lake (then known as Newark) was occupied by American forces. With many of his soldiers sick and malnourished, suffering the harsh winter, the American leader, Brigadier General George McClure, decided to withdraw. Before going though, he wanted to leave a reminder. On December 10, one of the coldest nights of the year, and despite reluctant troops who warned him that there were 400 women and children living there, McClure ordered his men to burn the entire town. They did as they were told.

Seething with vengeance, the British struck back. “On December 29, regulars and militia put the torch to Black Rock and Buffalo at the other end of the Niagara River. . . and laid waste to the entire U.S. side of the Niagara River to a depth of ten miles inland.”

Luminous with such gems of historical insight I was now prepared to wow Kimsu with my *savoir faire*. When I phoned Kimsu she asked about my mother. (I guess it’s a Korean respect thing.)

“She’s fine. I just talked to her the other night. Her friend Rosa isn’t doing so well though. You remember Rosa? She had an accident and broke her tailbone.”

“Oh my. What happened?”

“Would you believe she got in a fight?”

“A fight? What do you mean? She must be sixty-five years old!”

“Yeah, it’s pretty weird. My mother said that Rosa was grocery shopping. She reached for this turkey at the same time another woman did. It was the last turkey left so the other woman says, “Look, I can’t get turkey at this price anywhere in Canada but you can get them all the time here.” When Rosa heard that this woman was Canadian she told her to go back to her own country. The other woman got pissed off and started pulling on the turkey. Rosa wasn’t gonna let her get away with it so they started a tug of war, wrestling over this stupid turkey. Apparently Rosa slipped, fell on her ass and broke her tailbone.”

“I don’t get it.” Kimsu said. “Why are people of such wealthy countries fighting over food in grocery stores?”

“Well, I guess this whole turkey business is a bit unusual.”

Then I recalled General McClure burning down Newark, followed by the eye-for-an-eye burning of Buffalo. I pictured Rosa wrestling with this Canadian woman—digging her heels in and not giving an inch over the grocer’s frozen meat bins. I could see them, struggling over that prized butterball, spitting and hissing like alley cats.

“My turkey!”

“Mine!”

“My turkey!”

“Mine!”

“Mine!”

Kimsu was silent on the other end of the line. Then I asked her, “How’d you like to go back to

Niagara Falls sometime?”

She hesitated, then answered uncertainly. “Maybe I will go to see . . . some different places.”

Some different places: that covers a lot of ground. I have my reading cut out for me.

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1 This story was originally written in 1999, two years before 9/11 and the subsequent Homeland Security regime which changed the protocols for crossing the US-Canada border. After 9/11 travelers were required to carry either a Passport or an “enhanced” driver’s license when traveling between the two countries. Also, the quaint references to a road “atlas” instead of Google Maps and “Blockbuster video outlets” are artifacts of this period.