



Imp Sudestasie Paris

NOTES ON A HOMECOMING

Thaddeus Tuleja
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I

Coming home, Amerika. From a land of peace to a land of plenty. Living again with war fever.

Three years gone. Three years of Dick and Spiro, Pat and the partydress dolls. Three years more of bombings, streetfights, heady political puffing not quite nimble enough to hide the well-intended rape beneath. Kent, Jackson, My Lai, Attica: rude tetralogy floridly limning the old saw: when you think things can't get any worse, they always do. Three years more of young men like me who, unlike me, will not return. And me in the cafés, drinking Beaujolais, drinking bitter, drinking cognac and recriminating. What am I doing over here? There are, after all, only negative reasons for it: that things are so bad Back Home.

Are they better here? London, 1971. It has become a radical's truism that Britain is fast moving toward fascism. Ted Heath's bungling of the labor problem can have but one meaning. Ineptitude? Don't be naive. He is a toff, an evil man. He is out to cripple the working class.

Another truism underwrites this one. A truism I heard first in the mid-sixties, was asserting myself well before I left: America is *already* fascist. Amerika. (Some, fearing to leave anything to chance, spell it with a capital K, thus: AmeriKa.) Good old fascist Amerika. The orthographic sleight of hand turns what was once a tendentious hyperbole into a *fait accompli*, an article of dogma. Comfortable in my cafés, wined, dined, and anodyned, I embrace the faith. Three more years of bombs and betrayals: there is nothing else to be done.

Over here, however, it hurts. Antichauvinism cannot be exported, it too easily sours, turns to *self*-recrimination. So, close ranks against friends as against the Enemy. I meet a backpacker. "How long you been here?" "Week." "Yeah? What's happening back home?" "The Jeremiahs were right." But he will say something different when a limy asks him, for what is nodded glumly, knowingly, among us exiles is not fit for foreign ears. Or mouths. *New Yorker* cartoon: "If you don't mind, I'll make the wisecracks about my wife's hair rollers."

You bitch about it, about her, about Amerika, but the furriners had better shut up. What do they know? The only fight I had in three years in Europe (it *is* a land of peace) was with my Indian roommate,

who hated all Americans but tolerated me because I defended his lies to his girlfriend. Toleration was not enough. He taunted me, I him, we broke. Brief ludicrous struggle of two drunks: threats, tumbles, faceoff, standdown, shouldershrug, handshake, smiles. He thinks we are friends again now. I know better.

(Maybe I brought the evil with me, like David in *Straw Dogs*, the Melvillian curse. N.B. all Fanonists: no more than Suresh brought it with him. N.B. Nixon & Co: also no less.)

We fought about a cliché. Something about the capitalist monster burning innocent babies, snatching victory from the jaws of the starving millions of the world. His world, the third, infinitely deserving, world. A moderate socialist censure, which I have yelled myself a thousand times, stuck in my throat when Suresh threw it back to me. Because he, having left India fifteen years ago to become a black bushwah salesman, was no moral paragon, and I resented the self-righteousness. No. Because I could no longer escape the obvious: that I too was accomplice in The War.

How they all hate us. "If I had my way, I'd take every man, woman, and child in America and machine-gun them." Suresh again. Drunk again, also a bit playful, but no one says things like that entirely in jest. Do I count myself lucky I was not knifed in my sleep that night, because he had not the courage of his conniption? What a joke that would have been on my comrades back home, sending me out with grandly raised fists to do the revolution's work among the dusky races of the earth. Sepoy all over again.

But Suresh, fifteen years or no, is third world, also a bit mad. Dismissible. What rankles is Europe's hatred. Parisian rudeness is legendary, and well-deserved. But what of the WASP strongholds, where good manners is a national style? The English, next to us the worst xenophobes I've met, have a marvellous ability to forget their own worst episodes while ranting on about ours. The morally upright Englishman, who no longer has his own empire to defend, can afford to chide us for ours. Or the Swedes: thoroughbreds with the cool effrontery to advise us mongrels on race. In Sweden we are condemned for mangling a racial problem the immensity of which would set Sweden on its ass overnight.

My country right or wrong. See how, cornered, my hackles rise to defend the indefensible. One easy righteousness meeting another. For Europe's outrage, The War is (only) a catalyst. England has hated us since we were colonials with the bad taste to reject that most honorific of bribes, membership in the British Empire. France has hated us

since the German wars. I fear my friend Stacey, former radical now selling out with no illusions, has it right: "Those froggies will never forgive us for bailing them out." Invidiousness, as Nietzsche knew, as our own Veblen knew, the strongest of human motivations. Woe to them on high, for they shall be envied.

The War crystallizes resentments. Smouldering envy, fanned by The War, is now ablaze, sanctioned in the community of nations. Those European junior partners who for years had silently bitched at the old man's moxie, are now—now his blunders are coming to light—free to deny him publicly. (They will not, however, offer to take over the company.)

Europeans, virtually cut off from the burdens of command, are still free to register dismay and even outrage at The War. Deeply they are rationalists, optimists, even the Latins. They still believe things can be changed. Locke, and Shaftesbury, more than Calvin, give the cast of their minds. They lack that essential New Englander's courage to admit that the canker may be endemic, psycho-historical, incurable.

Whereas reputedly pragmatic America is awash in resignation. Even the ballyhoo of the election seems not enough to bring people out to the streets. Abbie Hoffman agrees with the Miami city fathers: we don't want another Chicago. I saw more people out for Angela Davis in Paris than in Washington. Is it because we Americans know better, or that we have learned to settle for less?

For three years in Europe I defended what I hated, unable to shake off my history. Now I return to meet it.

II

Coming home. Aren't you apprehensive, my English friends asked me, about going back? All those armed pigs. The Wild West. Fascism. Amerika, Aren't you afraid? Nah. But falling onto Kennedy I held tight hands with a college girl who, like me, had been away and who, like me, was terrified.

It's not at all what they expected. It's everything I knew it would be, and less. Coming off the plane, reassuring a German girl, preparing and unpreparing her. Don't worry, *Liebchen*, they never shoot krauts.

You don't see the guns. The customs inspector has no guns. The cops have thick holsters. The camera eye is unobtrusive. And how can you have fascism without guns?

The war economy. The atmosphere of death. The fascist state. No. We have not tasted fascism yet. You don't even have to carry cards here. Walking home in Paris one night, Marc and I were stopped by a carload of armed soldiers, asked for our papers, reprimanded for being two blocks from our home without identification. In Barcelona the *guardia civil* carry submachine guns.

Marc tells a story about the death of a leftist worker in Paris. The cops cornered him at the bottom of an air shaft, where he was found the next day crushed under a pile of manhole covers. (As Marc is a communist we may ignore the problem of radical bias: the *gauchistes* are no friends of his.) Now that is a fascist act, and France not even at war.

We have our horrors too. I do remember Schwerner, Clark, Hampton. But that is not class war, it is race, the dark secret pain of this land, and the point is no bourgeois quibble (except to the victims.) If the canker is race not class, the whole analysis changes.

I went looking for Amerika, and couldn't find it anywhere. The symptoms of this particular war fever are very elusive. Has The War really created a different atmosphere? Three more years. We must, by this time, be living under a sword, with the constant expectation of tragedy. The air must be brooding with drama and blood, we must be aware, every minute, that it's going to hit, any minute. Earthquake weather. If they come in the morning. . . . The knock on the door must chill us instantly, as it did Jews throughout the Reich. But I see no evidence of this.

In the fascist state, surely something must happen to the eyes of the subjects. They must glare somehow, or stiffen, roll involuntarily sideways, set dead ahead, unseeing. The people of that country are walking dead, phlebotomized, podpeople. But I see no evidence. I cannot say Americans today, after three more years of The War, are any more stretched, desensitized, strung out, than they ever have been.

So: American fascism, where is it? Or: How long have we been this way, that it has escaped me?

Americans have never yet chanted with one voice. We are not a melting pot at all, but a bubbling of the immiscible. Kin against kin, almost. Which makes for lots of trouble down these mean streets, but that is different from fascism.

Fascism implies a leader, and unity behind a leader. If the long-awaited genocidal war began tomorrow, who could lead us against the blacks?

Who could unite us in the domestic holocaust, who could not unite us well enough, these last ten years, effectively to exterminate a race halfway across the globe? US = SS, they write on the walls of Paris, meaning Chicago, meaning The War, but who would give the gestapo orders, who would obey? Who would unite us, let him first unite himself.

We are not that far gone yet. After three years, walking the streets again. A black kid passing calls me brother, with mockery in his eyes, yes, but smiling, swaying. He does not fear my gun, nor I his. Yet. This place, and Hitler's Germany, both fascist? If the word is to make any sense, it cannot be that flexible. It is only our laziness that compels us to use it: because it is so much easier to fight a villain than a fool.

A great and growing air of violence envelops this democratic, immigrant, society. Always has (has someone smiled on us, that we have not yet torn ourselves apart?). But it is not the violence of Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, Franco's Spain. That violence was brutal, swift, without loopholes. While American violence is as inept as it is pervasive. What chagrin must it bring to ready revolutionary souls to learn in the morning paper that last night the feds raided the wrong building. Official bungling, the hope of the revolutionary classes. The State's case against Angela Davis, a case in point.

Botched raids, false testimony, extorted confessions, wiretaps spilled, a phantasmagoria of police flummoxing that makes a prophet of Mack Sennett, a travesty of Efrim Zimbalist, mockery of the idea of the omniscient state. Fascism? Hitler wouldn't have let the New York police wash dishes at Berchtesgaden.

III

Now is the time for the compulsory dismissals. Revisionist. Crypto-fascist. Worst of all, pollyanna. But no, I am not sanguine, I will match my *Angst* with the best of them. For I fear that what we are up against is far more amenable, more seductive, more insidious, than fascism. We are up against not the wolf but the cow in all of us.

The single most depressing thing about returning to America, primed for the worst, is that it's quite livable. Coming back with your eyes rolling around corners, smelling out muggers, and surprise: I am back two months and not shot at yet. (Beats Ulster.) Wary, hypertensive, looking for the Ugly Mood all my friends' monitory letters kept preparing me for, and surprise: it's barely perceptible. The first week back,

only three people offer to cut my hair, only two hardhats jibe "queer" at me, only one harried driver gives me the finger. Three years have changed nothing, it's still SNAFU. The normal level of rapes and murders. In the inane phrase of the weather departments, the atmosphere is "acceptable."

This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but subtly, creepy, with scrimps of doublethink between the first and latter acts. How much will become "acceptable" before sclerosis sets in?

The War has gone on so long, nobody seems to notice it anymore. The longer the torture, the easier the pain: like purgatory turned limbo, a customary displeasure.

What would really shock us now is a month or so *without* casualty figures. As it is, we are used to the worst, so ignore it. Body counts have become like weather reports, something half-heard, aural stuffing between commercials. Pandemonic Muzak.

Recently the *New York Times* reported that eleven American soldiers had been killed by a mistaken barrage from our own guns. Three years ago, that would have burned some ears on Capitol Hill, merited at least an editorial. Now it's tucked comfortably into agate, the printer's equivalent to journalese; the effect of both is the same: pacification, anodyne, disguise, like a politician's blowsy. Three years more of this, on the surface, would be too much to take, too much to be admitted in irrefragable black and white; so, language learns to accommodate, and eleven men become not eleven men but an indeterminate "acceptable" number. What Karl Kraus so feared from wartime Vienna fifty years ago, the complete fracture of language, the standardization of doublethink, is coming true in America.

Television conspires. The packaging of the unspeakable allows it to be spoken. Fixing it, dry radioactive alembic, so that it no longer adheres to our consciousness, but only to itself. The coverage is clean, well-conceived, well-presented. Hence "acceptable." A clean, cool, medium: all the instruments agree, the day of his death was a dark dark day.

Consumption is our way of life, pandemic, and TV the agent of contagion. The circle of artificial needs and planned obsolescence now describes our economy: gay lockstep to the desired end, a cosmetic leisurely paradise, the TV in every room tuned to a giveaway show. As the anchor men keep pushing out their on-the-spot coverage, so adept is the marketing process that what is being marketed is forgotten. The surface is all. Corpses or boobs, bombs or sportscars, it's all the

same in this chilling, fixing, fixating medium. The booboisie applaud some starlet's chest while we radical groupies smirk and applaud camera angles, pacing, lingo. A copywriter's dream, sucked in by the very *bubris* which allows us to go on believing we are immune.

There is no difference between the rubes and the undergrounders. What makes me righteous, brother? The fact that I buy my beer with a sense of irony. It's bought just the same. What makes me righteous about The War? The rueful grin which twists my mouth as I hear this week's figures. They're dead just the same. The beat goes on. We don't really want The War to stop, even this three-year time around. There is too much invested, too much already drained. We will settle for a color TV in every home, and fuck the POWs. When Martin Luther King was shot, a wise and undeceived old man told me: things will not change now, because, like me, you are unwilling to surrender the least of your comforts. I had always hoped it was not that simple.

A hundred years from now the chroniclers may say that this was The Terror, that we—people of plenty—cared more about having than about either knowing or doing. And this it was that terrified the college girl and me as we banked over Long Island: not the fire in the streets—we would learn to deal with that—but the ubiquitous tawdriness of America, the cheap values, the consumer mind, to all of which, deep inside, we nodded a guilty Yea.

The war economy. It exists all right, but I could not at first find it because I was looking in the wrong place. It is not seen in burned bodies, but in the automatic lawn-sprinkler and the chaise lounge and me on it, reading travel brochures. People of peace, people of plenty, will they ever be the same people? The terrible irony of The War, is that it has so improved things: we seldom question that DMZ is an "acceptable" price to pay for the GNP.

What is wrong with America? We know what is wrong with her. We have always known. Boone knew. Thoreau knew. Lately crazy old Bill Burroughs told us once again: "Throw back their ersatz Immortality, it will fall apart before you can get out of The Big Store." We knew. But long ago we surrendered to our own venality the hope we never would have surrendered to fascism. Fascism would have been child's play.

IV

In these three years The War, our great "moral venture," has become bad business. So, finally, it may end. Small cheer in a bitter time.

Rows of empties, no deposit no return, for this we sell a birthright. Stretching way past our Western horizons, they seem to call us out again: with their dry elusive taunts, speaking of destinies yet unfulfilled, they call us out to where all the dreams of the *philosophes* and Kentucky's yeomen farmers and the grimy hardarmed railroad men, the dreams of all the gloried cacophony of roughriders quick and gone, are honed, refined, broken, filled. Those rows of dead soldiers, coupling our shining seas, the only pattern, tragic nation, that we have yet come up with to explain ourselves to ourselves.

Patrick Henry said it once: Forbid it, Almighty God! I shuddered once, hearing that, and I have not yet forgotten how to shudder. Coming home.