

A Friend

I am on a train, looking out the window. At Scotland. I said goodbye to Jim yesterday. Years ago, in 1987, Jim and I were on a train, in Pakistan. I was tired and felt too lazy to look out the window so I tried to nap but couldn't. When Jim saw I couldn't sleep he said I should look out the window. I asked what there was to look at and he said *"Why, it's Pakistan! It's just flying by. That's what we came to see."* So now I am looking at Scotland. It's what I came to see.

Jim and I met on the archaeological site of Mohenjo-Daro, an ancient city of the Indus River Civilization from around 2500 BC, with an undeciphered script and a little-known history. Walking along its orthogonal grid of streets, running my hand against the perfect brickwork of its walls, was like walking in the ruins of a medium-sized modern city. We met at the end of my first day on the site. No one else was there. We ate together at the guest house, and talked until late in the night, about ancient civilizations and our previous travels. I was 22 at the time so mine were limited. Jim was ten years my senior and his travels seemed endless to me. We visited the site for two more days then took a bus to Larkana. The bus was jam-packed so we rode on the roof, being very careful to keep our heads down. One of our Pakistani co-passengers was less careful and just missed being decapitated by a metal bar. From Larkana we took the train to Lahore, a fairly long trip, during which we watched Pakistan play over the windows like a movie.

When we arrived Jim and I got a room together for a few days. Each of us went about his own visits during the day but we ate dinner and talked together in the evenings. Jim remarked on the size and weight of my backpack. When I began my trip 7 weeks earlier in France it weighed around 30 kg, but I had already mailed a number of packages home. With Jim's assistance I reduced my burden further. Jim's backpack was very compact, around the size and weight of the one I am using now, roughly 7-8 kg. This disburthening went on in successive steps until my huge backpack was too voluminous and too heavy for its remaining contents to fill. So in its turn I mailed it back home as well. In its stead I found a canvas grain sack onto which Jim sewed carrying straps, before decorating it with a winged hitch-hiker's thumb, an auspicious symbol.

My train arrived in Edinburgh, a city of monuments hewn from the rock of the surrounding hills and blackened by time. Unfortunately, Edinburgh is blighted by industrial tourism. Tour buses everywhere, with groups from China, the US, Germany, and other countries. A density of tourists like that of a small seaside village submerged by the disgorgement of a cruise ship's passengers. I was shocked by this,

and it is October. I cannot imagine what it would be like in the summer. Jim would hate it here, or else know how to visit it better than I did. I nonetheless managed to find some places for reflection: a deserted university quadrangle; the cemetery where Robert Ferguson, Scottish poet who died young, is buried; and Calton Hill, a space open enough to find a calm and solitary place with a view over the city. Tomorrow I will go to Crieff, one of the places Jim most recommended to me. His most recent trip was to Scotland, looking possibly to move here, back onto land from the boat where he and his life-long companion Karen had lived for nearly 15 years. When we last spoke I asked him to tell me about this trip, as he had told me about so many others, and to recommend where I should go, which he did.

This morning I took the train to Dunblane and then a bus to Crieff. True to my general paranoia, although the bus company website said the bus was at 1400, leaving me plenty of time to have lunch, I went to check at the actual bus stop, where the schedule said otherwise. Two local people were awaiting the bus at 1300 and they turned out to be correct. The next one was in late afternoon, so my paranoia paid off. I still had time for a brisk walk to Dunblane Cathedral, then got the bus to Crieff. This is the beauty of traveling light, which I learned from Jim, to be free to walk where one wants. The urge to move and to explore is not dulled by the weight of one's belongings.

The scenery on the ride to Crieff was full of pastoral beauty, like rural Pennsylvania. Fields with large sheep, a few horses, hay for the winter. High treeless mountains in the distance (the Cairngorms I presume). I will go there later. Jim liked Crieff, and said it was esthetically mature, with a quaint and pleasant town center. I could imagine him living here, in a cottage outside of town, maybe with a view on the river. Travel brings strangeness to the soul. I am still the man I was before, but the outside world impinges more strongly on my being, dampens my habitual emotions, and brings new ones. Travel slows the passage of time. For some of us it is a sort of panacea. Perhaps we are running from something. That is alright. We run, we pass through, and then, like everyone else, we are gone.

My stay in Crieff was charming. I wandered in the town, had lunch in the pub, and visited a well-stocked wine shop Jim had mentioned to me, as well as a few galleries. My room in the hotel was light and airy yet warm and comfortable, and the steak I had for dinner was good. The next morning I walked to the bus stop to take the bus to Perth, a larger town which Jim had also mentioned. Arriving in Perth I walked to my hotel, then promptly went to the train station and found a taxi driver to bring me to Linn of Dee, to hike across the Cairngorm Mountains. Excited by the prospect of this hike being realized, I went to buy food for it. Strange how the proximity of a long-imagined challenge enlivens me! I am ready.

When Jim and I first met in Pakistan we travelled together for a week. We then separated as I had decided to pursue the misguided idea of going to Afghanistan, then at war against the Soviets. This plan was aborted, so I continued north into the Himalayas, first to Skardu and then Gilgit. In Gilgit I took a bed in a large dormitory. Preparing to turn in, who entered the dormitory room and walked directly towards me but Jim! His backpack was under the bed immediately next to mine, unseen. By chance. The next day we got a private room for the two of us, and I asked him to recount all of his travels to me. Jim was 32 at the time, having started traveling while still in his teens, so this was no small task. During the next three days, over innumerable cups of green tea, chicken jalfrazi lunches, and an occasional beer, Jim told me his stories.

After high-school, doing cartography work for the Canadian government in not-yet-mapped western British Columbia, where he met an old prospector who had hiked over the mountains with sacks of rice and beans, a rifle, and some equipment, raised a family with a native woman, and never returned. Later travels to Central America and then to Africa, where he saw watermelons growing on the roofs of thatched huts and hitched a long ride on a cargo ship. And a long trip through India which preceded the trip to Pakistan where we met. Of all the people I have known in my life, I have never met a traveler like Jim: curious, disciplined, careful, kind, and extremely observant. And also an excellent photographer.

From Gilgit we travelled together to Hunza, both intending to go over the Khunjerab Pass into Xingjiang (Chinese Turkestan). Around this time, two unforeseen events changed the course of my journey. First, a large landslide wiped out parts of the Karakoram Highway along around 10 km of the route towards the Khunjerab. And second, demonstrations in Lhasa were put down brutally by the Chinese Army, which killed 19 Tibetans and then closed Tibet and expelled all foreign visitors. Jim and I spent around a week in Hunza where we completed the reduction of my equipment and the sewing of a grain sack into a new backpack, ate a lot of the famous Hunza apricots, and hiked in the mountains above the town. I almost got killed by a huge rock falling from thousands of meters above the glacier, where I was imprudently hiking alone. I left Hunza before Jim, as I knew the high passes into Tibet would close due to winter and I wanted to cross them before they did. I thus walked the damaged section of the Karakoram Highway and continued on to Kashgar.

In Kashgar I stayed in the Qinibagh Hotel, the former British Consulate from the time when Eric Shipton was Consul. I am fairly sure I slept in his office. Again without planning, Jim turned up at the same place, and we continued our evening discussions, and occasionally visited the town together. One evening the two of us played guitar and sang for an audience at the Oasis Café, including a rendition of “Old Man” by Neil

Young that remains the most memorable musical performance I've given in my life. We played it again together in 2015 when Jim attended my 50th birthday party, and I played it alone the other day on Jim's guitar. On October 28th, 1987 Jim and I separated, and I travelled south into Tibet by a route that had always been forbidden. I judged, correctly, that it would not be "more closed" after the violence in Tibet than it was before. Jim wrote to me *poste restante* in Lhasa, starting his letter with "*If you get this, I bet your bones are cold!*" It was indeed terribly cold on the high-altitude plateaux of Tibet in November and December when I was there. For his part, Jim continued eastwards, through the Takla Makan Desert to Urumchi then to China proper and Hong Kong, then back to Karen in London. Though we did not meet in person again for years, we kept in touch, our meeting having led to a life-long friendship.

The next morning, Mr. Stewart, the taxi driver with whom I had arranged to drive me to Linn of Dee, arrived at 0600 as planned. This would allow me to arrive just as the sun was rising. During the drive I asked him about Perth, and he described its decline as an economic center. General Accident, an insurance company, had its headquarters in Perth years ago, and provided lifetime employment for many local people, even going so far as to provide dowries for female employees when they married. Now all that is left is a call center. And Mr. Stewart himself worked for 30 years in an aircraft repair facility whose activities were centralized elsewhere. Just another tale of the impact of global capitalism on local people. Some of its effects have been beneficial, but others not so much.

Arriving near Linn of Dee I could see light snow cover reflecting on the mountains in the half-light. Alpenglow. The weather report was for gale force winds and heavy snow at higher elevations, including the Lairig Ghru Pass which was my path across the mountains. This made me slightly nervous. But I have a lot of wilderness experience and had proper clothing and a bivy sack (though I did not have a sleeping bag or tent), so I decided to go ahead. To me, nothing equals an adventurous hike or climb for the psychological state it puts me in. It creates a distinct moment, a before and an after, because its issue is to some degree uncertain. The sun was just rising as I left Linn of Dee at a brisk pace. When I do a serious hike I set the fastest pace that my level of fitness, the terrain, and the need to navigate precisely will allow. I keep that pace without stopping, usually for 4-6 hours, sometimes more. The land was beautiful and no one else was about. The wind was constant at 50-60 km/h with stronger gusts. A few snowflakes were falling as I left, and from time to time there was a squall with heavy snow. As I rose in altitude towards the pass the force of the wind increased to the point that gusts would deviate my steps to the left or right, or push against me so hard that I had to lean forward as I advanced. Arriving at the Lairig Ghru I was in a

tempest, winds near 100 km/h, sandblasting hard sleet full in my face. Visibility was very low, and the path, which had been clear up to here, was now over a trackless field of scree.

While I walked I was thinking of Jim. Often when I get tired I recite poetry, and sometimes become emotional out there alone against the elements, in the middle of nowhere. I recited Baudelaire's *La Mort des Amants* and then as the wind was rising crescendo, *A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London*, by Dylan Thomas. Melted sleet mixed with tears on my face as I yelled into the gale "Good bye Jim!" After this I descended from the pass and the sun came out again, a blessing. I felt a bit tired but continued to press on through the Chalamain Gap, a 600-meter-long chaos of stone blocks. I did not want to be there for the next snow squall. I arrived without rest or incident, around 30 km and 6 hours after starting, and hitched a ride into Aviemore with a kind young traveler.

A few months ago I was with my wife driving from home to the beach. My phone rang and it was Jim's number. Jim never calls me, so I was concerned. It was Karen. She told me that Jim was dying and wanted to speak with me before he died. We spoke that evening. He was fully lucid, even enthusiastic, as I had always known him. I offered to come to see him the next day, but he said it was too late. So we spoke about our lives and I asked him about his last trip, the one to Scotland, looking for a place to move back onto land from the nomadic *Narrowboat Life*¹ he and Karen had been living. Then I asked him where I should go in Scotland and he told me Crieff, and Perth, and a few other places. I told him that I would go there, and I wished him a good final journey, to that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns.

My wife and I traveled to Reading to see Karen. We visited *The Ruffian*, their boat, in Newbury, took long walks along the canals and the Thames, and talked about Jim's life and their life together. On Sunday we met Jim's brother Chris and his wife Sandra who had come from Canada, and we all walked along the Thames from Goring until we found a suitable spot, then scattered Jim's ashes in the river, as he had wanted. *My Funny Valentine*. Yellow rose petals slowly spinning in the current, moving downstream. Tears and reflections on a well-lived life.

*"Secret, by the unmourning water
Of the riding Thames.
After the first death, there is no other."*

¹ Jim Batty. *Narrowboat Life: Discover Life Afloat on the Inland Waterways*. London: Adlard Coles. 2019 (new edition).