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Scratch Paper: An American Sketch of a European Life

I emerged from the tunnel staggering under the weight of an enormous green backpack, along with a few other items that I clutched maniacally to my body while my eyes darted about suspiciously. Thieves were everywhere.

Actually, harried businessmen in expensive suits were everywhere. Still, the *Let's Go Europe* guidebook had said there would be thieves, so I had to be very cautious. I had no intention of being the next Daisy Miller, the next wide-eyed New World innocent to be crunched in the maw of wily old Europe. No sir. I had read the guidebook.

I had popped up out of the Underground station in the City, the most ancient square mile of London, which used to lie inside the city walls. It is now an uninhabited place, except during business hours, when it throbs with an astoundingly high proportion of the world's financial trading traffic. It was into this bewildering mix of ancient and ultra-modern that I took my first steps on the streets of Europe. And man, they were some tangled streets.

I was lost within five minutes; I was *really* lost within five more. I was scared to pull out a map on the street, because *Let's Go Europe* said that if thieves saw me doing that, they would pounce on me. I was disoriented, tired, and entertaining a suspicion

that the youth hostel didn't actually exist. In despair I looked up, and only then did I notice I had been wandering around at the foot of St. Paul's Cathedral. It was tall, breathtaking, reassuringly solid; it reminded me why I had come.



St. Paul's reminded me that I had spent three years in college studying architecture, but no longer wanted to be an architect. That's not to say that I hated architecture; I still loved it very deeply in all its fabulous variety of historical forms (just not in its abysmal monotony of commercial forms.) So I had come to Europe with a long checklist of famous buildings to see, hoping that at least I could make good use of my architectural history courses. Stumbling upon St. Paul's that afternoon, I thought, *Yes! I can already check one off!*

Like most Americans, I grew up with a romanticized image of Europe. In his famous essay "The Author's Account of Himself," Washington Irving writes that, for his restless mind, "Europe held forth the charms of storied and poetical association. . . . Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age." Things haven't changed that much since Irving's day; Americans still see Europe as a place of Old World charm, studded with storybook castles and hallowed old churches, populated by sagacious old geezers in flat caps and waifish, sophisticated young women. I couldn't wait.

Irving writes about his desire to "visit this land of wonders ... and see the giant race from which I am degenerated." I suppose, like him, I was on a search for my cultural roots, but there was something politically subversive about my plans:

An important effect of my years in college was that I was developing what I thought of as progressive social views. This meant that I complained a lot during class discussions: *Americans are too individualistic and don't take care of their poor neighbors; American cities show total disregard for public space; American foreign policy is ignorant and chauvinistic; Americans consume and waste a disproportionate share of the world's resources.* It seemed I was a *dissenter*, one of the folks Christopher Hitchens describes in *Letters to a Young Contrarian* as “people who feel themselves in some fashion to be *apart*.” I wondered whether Irving was right, whether “the refinements of highly-cultivated society” could be found in Europe. I hoped to see Europeans doing a better job on some of these issues, and maybe even bring some solutions home with me. But mainly I was pissed off about the car thing.

You might not know it to look at me, but I'm a cripple. A congenital defect of my ocular nerves means that I have to live with astonishingly bad eyesight. Even with glasses my vision is well below the legal limit for a driver's license. So I ride the bus, bike, or walk down the otherwise empty sidewalk grumbling to myself, “second-class citizen, second-class citizen.” Commentator Andrei Codrescu, another non-driver, writes that in America “living without a car is the worst form of destitution, more shameful by far than not having a home. A carless person is a stationary object, a prisoner, not really a grownup.” (My spell-checker just balked at *carless*; it's not part of American English.) He's right; when I admit that I don't drive, Americans tend to look baffled, as if they hadn't accounted for that possibility. I had heard that many people in

Europe got around just fine without cars; driving, there, seemed to be an option rather than an expectation. I wanted to experience that.



My first plan was to study in the small Spanish town of Salamanca. When I saw the prices for these study-abroad programs, I realized my plans would have to involve paying work instead. BUNAC, a work-abroad exchange program, offered a six-month work permit for the UK, along with advice on finding a job and housing. This sounded like a fine place to start, and with luck I would have enough money left afterward for a quick spin around the rest of Europe. So I took a leave of absence from my university and began packing my great green backpack in that grand old first-time-traveler fashion, which is to say overpacking. I was comically overloaded with my stack of guidebooks, an all-season wardrobe, a range of footwear, and an iron; it wasn't quite so comical while I was lugging it all through the airport.

After what seemed like hours but was probably only minutes, I did find that hostel. Once I had set down my crushing load and phoned to reassure my anxious mother, I stepped out to have a more composed look around. I was overwhelmingly charmed and stimulated. There were so many cathedrals, monuments, and ancient-looking streets, so many people rushing about. They were all chattering away in crisp accents that made them sound so foreign, but I smiled to think: now *I* was the foreigner. There were endless differences to notice, but it was the tiny ones that enthralled me: magically colorful banknotes, red post boxes, beans with breakfast, separate hot and cold taps. The challenge of relearning how to manage every detail of my daily life

produced a bubbling blend of annoyance, joy, frustration, and wonder. And the language! The tiny, omnipresent differences in vocabulary, spelling, and grammar would keep me fascinated for my entire stay there. Even on the flight over, I had sat next to a young Englishman who commented on the “nice birds” who were serving us the in-flight meal. Not diminutive *hot chicks*, but grown-up-sounding *birds*. *How very respectful*, I remember thinking.

The best difference, I thought soon after arriving, had to be the Tube. The transit system in London was just as promised: clean, efficient, and wildly comprehensive. The buses were good, but the London Underground was about the best thing I’d ever seen. I could get *anywhere* in the city without a car; in fact, owing to the atrocious traffic, the Tube could get me across London *faster* than a car. My disability no longer meant anything; I could get around just as well as anyone else. I spent two full days in the London Transport Museum, making a thorough study of the history of mass transit. In truth it was more of a religious pilgrimage.

Once I began looking for work, it was the Tube that took me to my first job interviews. *A nice office job*, I thought, *that’s where the money is*. But I discovered that offices in the financial capital of the world were not like offices in my little California hometown. I left my first few interviews feeling very out-of-place; it was like I had “bumpkin” written on my forehead. I had planned on finding a job in three, maybe four days. Two weeks passed, and desperation began to set in.

Finally, a break: I was called to interview for a mysterious little company called Premmit in the bustling Victoria district. Now, had I really been paying attention

during the interview, I might have noticed that the owner, one Reginald Gourgey, was a tad senile and unstable, or that I had no clear idea what I would be doing in the job, or that the office (which was also Gourgey's home) was in an advanced state of mold. But all I could notice right then was my own plummeting bank balance – I took the job. I *did* note on my way out, with some bemusement, a purple plaque stating that Winston Churchill had once lived in the house. *Well, I thought, with that seal of approval, the place must be okay.*

It turned out not to be, really. I soon came to think of Mr. Gourgey as a sort of walking museum exhibit of the English aristocracy, circa 1930. He had the complete package: war medals, a posh nasal accent, and a whiny, playboy son. He was well into his nineties, and had apparently not noticed that it was now fashionable to treat people decently. Even Yanks. "He's the last of the British imperialists," was my colleague Trevor's final word on the matter.

Gourgey's business was supposed to involve recruiting engineers and other technical types for aerospace companies, but it seemed to consist mainly of him tinkering with his stock portfolio and flouting various tax laws. My job was to trawl through dusty stacks of CVs for qualified applicants, while pleading with old Gourgey to buy a computer. I eventually concluded that he didn't need any employees; he just enjoyed having people around that he could yell at.

Meanwhile I had secured a place to live in the Brixton area in the south of London. None of the other BUNAC students would consider living there because it was the "Afro-Caribbean" neighborhood, and more importantly, it had suffered a spot of

rioting a few years previous. But I figured there's nothing like a little civil unrest to get you out of bed in the morning. Actually I had found I couldn't afford anything more central, and John, the owner of the flat, had a spare room that was perfect for me.

A few nights after I moved in, John and I were talking about America when he mentioned his longstanding desire to own an Airstream "caravan."

"Airstream, Airstream ... oh, you mean a *trailer*. One of those rounded silver ones you always see sitting dented at the back of a trailer park with the wheels removed, right?"

This seemed to sadden him. "Well, I think they're quite nice," he objected. "I want to buy one and drive it across Americur." He always said it with that "r" on the end.

I had always had trouble understanding why Europeans would have any interest in visiting the plain, historyless United States. But the idea of my refined, professional, English flatmate taking the Great American Road Trip stunned me. *I* didn't even want to do that.

As I began to explore the neighborhood, I found a stone neoclassical church that had rented out its crypt as a nightclub. Later I discovered there was actually a market street called Electric Avenue, and if you "rocked down" to it you could find people selling mysterious African root vegetables so large they could double as home-defense weapons. For the first time in my life, I felt frightfully cosmopolitan.

Before arriving, I had somehow thought my presence would draw at least a few curious onlookers, maybe even some smitten English women. Certainly back in my

little town, foreign students were of great interest and never lacking for a date. But London turned out to be populated by just about every sort of human being ever made, and I was hardly considered exotic. I would have to wait until Christmas for that.

My colleague Trevor was a Yorkshireman on whom London life had grown a hard, curmudgeonly crust. He derived a perverse glee from filling our tiny office with the smoke from his cheap fags and then grinning cruelly at me and the other American employee while we coughed our tender lungs out. But when Trevor learned that I was planning to spend Christmas alone, he insisted I come to Luton to celebrate with his family.

Luton has only two things going for it: an airport that's just north of London, and a number of very popular bingo halls. I laughed when they asked me to go, but when we got to the bingo hall it was no laughing matter. I could tell the woman next to me was a very serious player because she had an extra-strength bingo dauber in each hand, no less than a dozen cards in front of her, and a cigarette in her mouth. Losing money at bingo is apparently one of the top vices of the British working class, but as vices go, it's far too silly-looking to get really worked up about.

Trevor introduced me to his brood of four children, and from them I finally got the adulation I was craving. They were full of probing questions about American culture. I did my best to answer, but his eldest daughter was disappointed to find out *she* knew far more about Britney Spears and 'N Sync than I did.

He then introduced me to a woman who looked for all the world like his wife, but wasn't. Trevor and Maryanne were *partners*, a term which usually means a sort of

undeclared marriage. It seemed that a situation some Americans term *living in sin* had become a respectable, growing institution in England. At first this offended my small-town sensibilities, but after watching them for a while, the arrangement appealed to me very much. I met several of these couples during my trip: people who fully intended to stay together the rest of their lives – even raise children together – without feeling the need to trap one another in legal bonds. It was as if having the freedom, in theory, to walk out on one another somehow made them feel at ease about staying together.

Trevor also took me out and gave me an appreciation for buying and consuming rounds of beer at an irresponsible speed, like a proper working-class punter. English beer was far better than any beer I'd had in America: bitter and thick and tasting like thousands of years of know-how had gone into making it. It wasn't like the watery slop that relied on half-naked women for its popularity in my home country. This distinction took on a more symbolic meaning for me the longer I was in Europe.



In January I had been at Premmit for over three months, which I thought was plenty long enough. One morning I announced that my New Year's resolution was to not work there anymore, and gave them a week's notice. I was feeling pretty empowered until I remembered I had spent all my money on beer over the holidays and would be facing eviction if I didn't find another job in about five minutes.

This is what I call the "scratch paper" nature of the traveling life. Travelers get up to all kinds of outlandish activities: growing a beard, having torrid love affairs, or, say, quitting their jobs just because they don't like their bosses. All these things would

be viewed as suspect or rash back home, but away from the moderating influence of friends and family, all sorts of things seem normal. Try something out; if it works, go with it for a while. If it goes horribly wrong, pack your bags and try again. Like scratch paper, life on the road is impermanent, experimental. If you don't like the life you've drawn, tear it up and start over.

My new start came in the form of an ad for a position in a small architectural firm. I knew something about that, so I faxed off my CV. The office was in Twickenham, a suburb of London some way up the River Thames; it sounded leafy and quiet, a welcome respite from the din of central London. But when I arrived in Twickenham to interview, I discovered two things. First, the office was actually on an island in the middle of the river, which had an improbable and deeply English name: Eel Pie Island. The local lore was that Henry VIII, whilst barging his merry way up and down the Thames, was fond of stopping at this particular island where the inhabitants would feed him eel pies. (Given half a chance, the English will bake almost anything inside a pastry crust. Not even eels are safe.)

Now, Eel Pie Island is tiny and roadless, and is only reached by its long, graceful arc of a footbridge. And the second thing I discovered was: the Thames is a tidal river. When the tide comes in, water actually flows backward up the river, causing its level to rise and fall by several meters. For reasons I never learned, the earthworks charged with holding back this tidal flow were no longer adequate, and on certain days the bridge entrance flooded. I had apparently arrived at just the wrong moment. I phoned the architect's office from a nearby phone box, and they wished me good luck; I was pretty

sure they were testing me. Rolling up my trouser legs and holding my shoes high, I slogged in. When I arrived on their doorstep a moment later, all drippy and determined, I think they felt a little obligated to hire me.

It turned out to be a great job, and the boss even provided lunch every day, which it was my job to shop for. I became *Christopher, crosser of mighty rivers and procurer of lunch*.

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One day in early March the sun came out; I didn't recognize it at first. Squinting at the calendar, I realized my work permit was about to expire and it was time to begin my grand tour of Europe. I quit my job again, bought a rail pass, and boarded the good ship *Dana Anglia* for Denmark. My first act upon debarking from the ship was to get lost again, in the middle of Copenhagen late at night. A benevolent German girl noticed my bewildered wanderings and led me to the youth hostel. She was, in fact, one of the few Europeans I met on my entire trip. All the rest were Australians.

What nobody tells you about doing the Eurail thing and the youth hostel thing is that you meet plenty of interesting people along the way: Canadians, New Zealanders, South Africans, and the ever-present hordes of Australians. (There were so many Australians, in fact, that I finally had to ask them if anybody was left back in Australia. It turns out that, whereas it was rebellious for me to wander off and see the world, the opposite is true in Australia: Staying home and getting a job is rebellious.) Just about the only people you don't have a chance of meeting are the natives of the place you're visiting. Part of this is the language barrier, but mainly it's just that the locals are busy

leading their everyday European lives, which don't involve youth hostels or tourist attractions. I found I was part of a backpacker subculture that, while quite fun and engaging, kept me surprisingly well insulated from the place I told myself I was experiencing. There was simply very little need, and very little opportunity, to interact with European people on a personal level; they became part of the scenery.

One day in Vienna, however, I couldn't ignore the locals; they were having a large, noisy political demonstration. From what I could make out with my limited German, their signs and banners proclaimed "No War in Kosovo" and "USA Stay Out." I remembered gathering from bits of news back in England that my country, under the auspices of NATO, was preparing to wage war in Kosovo. I also remembered that many Europeans were outraged by what they saw as Yankee meddling in European affairs.

To be honest, I didn't know a thing about Balkan politics at the time. But I remembered the first Gulf War, how as a high-school kid I had soaked up hour after hour of CNN and rooted for the USA like lots of other folks. I also remembered the aftermath, how eventually facts came out that made the war seem ill-advised, and how I had felt a little duped. Outside the reach of American TV, was I now getting a higher truth about the Kosovo war from the BBC? The coverage certainly wasn't the cheerleading I was used to. They were giving an awful lot of time to the war protesters; and now here I was face to face with them.

When you grow up in America, you learn that war is something that happens on *other* people's continents. Now I had a war taking place less than 450 miles away – about the distance from San Diego to San Francisco. From that vantage point, the

formerly unassailable rightness of American foreign policy didn't seem quite so unassailable any more. I felt a strange impulse to run up and apologize to those people, but thinking it better to not become a focal point for anyone's anger I ducked into a museum instead.

History, in the short run at least, has smiled on that uncharacteristically brief and tidy case of military intervention. Even the French seem to grudgingly admit that it halted a genocide and saved lives. But this approval is still far from universal, and on that afternoon in Austria it definitely wasn't. These weren't god-crazed Islamists from some impossibly distant place burning an American flag on my TV screen; these were real, physical people expressing real anger over something my faraway government was doing in *my* name.

I got another disturbing view of my country a couple weeks later in Spain. After spending so many days on trains, I was yearning for somewhere to rest for a while, and Barcelona was the place. Luis, a friend from California, was studying there and offered to take me in. While he slaved away in classes, I was enjoying the city's Mediterranean weather and astounding architecture. One afternoon we were in a lively little café near his apartment enjoying a heartfelt chat over a pair of *café con leche* and some delicate pastries. It was my European dream incarnate. Then we looked at the front page of *El País*.

I could tell that something had happened in America, but everything takes longer to figure out in a second language. Luis was translating for me: "another school shooting, guns, bombs, perhaps twenty-five dead, something about a 'gabardine mafia',

... hey, Littleton, Colorado. Isn't that where your parents live?" It was. I knew my family was safe; they wouldn't have been at Columbine High School. But the proximity of such violence to my family made the news all the more jarring. I felt disappointment, outrage, sorrow, but not much surprise. I'd been to Littleton; it was the sort of place where everyone had their acre of land, house, and three cars: a fiercely independent place where people don't ask one another for help too often. Folks there like to think their actions don't affect anyone else – even poor parenting skills.

Again I felt that vague embarrassment, this time at being linked to a place, to a culture that so often and so violently tears itself apart: America, the Wild West, an awkward teenager of a nation. I felt oddly self-conscious as we slunk out of the café.



John Steinbeck, in the first chapter of *Travels With Charley*, points out how a traveler might think he's in control of his trip, but is actually being hauled along by this sentient creature that is the journey. "We find after years of struggle," he writes, "that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us." Boy, was he ever right. My trip dragged me straight into a lettuce field.

It was a beautiful spring in Europe, and I couldn't get enough of it. I toured Spain and Portugal for another month, saw scores of lovely churches and museums, and ran my bank account dangerously low. But I still wasn't satisfied. I sure as hell wasn't ready to go back to the States. *America's no place for me*, I thought to myself; *I heard they shoot people there*.

Eager to keep the trip going despite my sorry financial state, I thought about going back to work. It seemed best to try this back in England, since I spoke a little of the language and knew my way around already. My work permit was long expired, but a little fib to the immigration officer got me in, and another little fib about “waiting for my work permit renewal to come through” landed me a job with a lettuce farmer up North. Before I really knew what I was doing, I was on a bus to the town of Southport, near Liverpool.

Farm labor is the stereotypical job of choice for “undocumented workers” in California, so agriculture seemed like a natural place for me to start. I became a lettuce wrapper. You know how the iceberg lettuce in the market comes wrapped in a plastic bag? That was my vocation. Grab lettuce. Stuff into bag. Tape closed. Repeat 1500 times daily. Plus I had to get up at 5:30 in the morning seven days a week, and my pay was comically low. Other than that it was a great job. This pretty quickly confirmed my suspicion that politicians who rail against “illegal immigrants who take jobs away from hardworking citizens” are telling vicious lies. George W. Bush’s recent proposal for a guest worker program, which he would like to promote as a favor to Mexicans, isn’t; it’s a favor to Americans. No American (or Englishman, for that matter) would take the job I had if he could legally get any kind of better one. When Luis heard about these adventures later, he dubbed me the “wetback of England.”

But at the same time, part of me felt a strange satisfaction with the work. Coming home in the evening, I *knew* I had done a day’s work — knew it not just in my head, but in my hands and arms and back. There was something honest and wholesome about it.

This was the sort of work my Oklahoma grandparents had done to get through the Great Depression. It was as if some nagging call in my genes had brought me there to live out a bit of my sweaty, dirt-encrusted heritage.

In *On The Road*, Sal Paradise turns to agricultural work when he finds himself cash-strapped in California. He finds the life of a cotton-picker frustrating and humiliating, but also strangely rewarding: “It was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth. . . .Birds sang an accompaniment. I thought I had found my life’s work. . . .I was a man of the earth, precisely as I had dreamt I would be.”

In the end, Sal is not cut out to be a “man of the earth”; back home in New Jersey, it wouldn’t have occurred to him to set foot on a farm. But away from friends and family and all the familiar surroundings that remind him that he *can’t* be a farmhand, he decides to try the role on, just like a straw hat. You can do things like that when you’re living a scratch paper life.

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Southport was one of those classic Victorian seaside towns: the kind that was once a crowded working-class resort, but with the rise of affordable air travel, had been supplanted by sunnier climes. I could almost imagine throngs of people eating ice cream, strolling along the promenade, or trying to play on the sticky mud that passes for a beach in England. Southport had become a much quieter place since everybody started flying to Ibiza instead. It *did*, however, have a healthy population of South African farm workers.

It seemed that the role filled by migrant Mexican workers in California was filled in England mostly by white South Africans recruited for “working holidays.” And despite the fact that calling lettuce-wrapping a “holiday” is sort of a cruel joke, they did seem to be having a fine time. The farm labor company put us up in large old houses, which turned out to be pretty bohemian places. Within fifteen minutes of my arrival, my new housemates were dragging me out to a pub over my protests that I wanted to turn in early and be at my best for the lettuce in the morning. And so I met Marina.

All along my journey, I had met other lone travelers in hostels and on trains, and formed a sort of travel friendship with many of them. Within a few hours of meeting another traveler, we would often talk, act, and look like we had been best buddies for years. A couple days later, when it was time to move on to the next city, we parted ways and normally never spoke again. There was a sort of tacit agreement within the backpacker culture that people could team up to offer one another assistance and much-needed companionship, but also that they would walk away without any attachments at the end. It was a wonderful thing to be part of, but I had the nagging feeling that it was wrong to think of something as a friendship that formed with such quickness and intensity, yet evaporated just as quickly: a sort of mutual delusion. I started to yearn for a face that would stay around long enough to become familiar.

I was soon to discover that travel romances form with the same sort of speed and intensity as do travel friendships. I met Marina within four hours of hitting town; three hours later we were an item, and in less than a week we were more or less living together. That timescale might sound a little rash, but when you live in a world where

people use a big green backpack for a dresser and wander off to the train station without so much as a goodbye, you don't lose any time in firming up your bonds with someone you really like.

She was six years my senior, an educated woman who spoke Afrikaans, English, and some Xhosa. She was also the survivor of probably the most wretched and violent marriage I'd ever heard of. She was hoping that time away from home would heal some of her wounds, and I was clearly to be part of that process.

After about a month and a half, I was promoted to the lettuce-chopping facility where Marina worked: a coveted job because it paid more and provided a coffee break every two hours. It also required working a 10-hour shift inside a giant refrigerator, which didn't agree with my California constitution at all. I finally insisted that we go find a job a few notches up the prestige scale, or at least that didn't require three sweatshirts and a winter coat.

I had heard that pub managers, known as landlords, weren't always too scrupulous about work permits. We headed for London and soon found work at a pub in Croydon, an ancient town in London's southern orbit. It was a job for a couple, one of the live-in pub jobs that backpackers covet. During the interview, the landlord explained that I would serve at the bar while Marina helped in the kitchen and served food. That would be fine, I told him, and right then was when my fibbing finally got me into trouble.

Did you know that many white South Africans have never done their own laundry or washed dishes? This is because, despite the "fall of apartheid" in South

Africa, all the menial jobs are still occupied by blacks. The black people will work so cheaply, in fact, that all but the most destitute of white families have domestic help; even regular, middle-class folk have maids and other servants. The lesson to the reader is this: if you ever think of getting a pub job with your South African girlfriend, make sure you have actually *seen* her cook and clean before you promise she can do it. We were sacked and tossed out in less than two weeks.

But while it lasted, it was a great situation. The pub, the Dog & Bull, was located on a market street. Such markets are a common sight in England, but this was the best one I had seen. It wasn't one of those once-a-week novelty farmer's markets that American cities have, but an all-day-every-day fruit and vegetable hawking onslaught. We were awakened at seven o'clock every morning by a woman outside our window squawking "Oooowl these bananer ear, fifty pee, fifty, fifty, fifty!!!" This of course meant that she would like to sell any passers-by a tremendous fistful of fresh tropical fruit for a low, low price. Which is not something you wish to hear about when you've only been in bed five hours. But they *were* quite good bananas.

There was a sign outside the Dog & Bull that claimed a pub had been on that spot since at least the late sixteenth century, which meant I was working in an establishment that had a longer history than the entire *nation* I came from. There was a tight-knit group of men who sat around the bar all day; eventually I realized these fellows owned the market stalls, and by hiring assistants they could run their businesses from inside the pub while getting pleasantly drunk every single day. (Which, if not very good for their livers, was undeniably resourceful.) These men had

none of that hang-dog self-pity or shame that sometimes clings to people with “low-class” jobs in the States; they got by just fine and were content, even *proud* to be marketmen. It was something I observed throughout my trip, actually: a bit less of the restless, tortured materialism that passes for ambition in America; a bit less of that pathological disdain for the people that sell us our food or nail our houses together; a bit more recognition that there is value and honor even in the “lower stations” of life.

Our station, however, had just dropped a little *too* low, and we needed another job. A bit stung by her experience in Croydon, Marina preferred to go north again and get back into vegetable processing. This astounded me, since she actually had a work permit and could take most any job, but I realized she just wanted to be around other South Africans; going along with her plan, I soon found myself in Preston, Lancashire.

Preston was an old northern English industrial town that had lost most of its industries. This capital flight tends to leave a gritty sort of place that doesn't get much mention in tourist guides. Marina's new employer lodged us in a big house – actually a crumbling former hotel – with the rest of their crew. Along with the several varieties of South African, there were a couple Australians, a couple Czechs, an Italian, a black American who grew up in Spain, and me. It was a big, happy Tower of Babel.

Marina's boss didn't buy my work permit story but let me live in the house with her. The next day, after she left for the vegetable factory, I reconnoitered the town. It was grimy but endearing somehow; it had a pleasant town square, a couple of gothic churches, and a covered market where you could buy bread right from the baker, meat

from the butcher, and nuts from the implausibly named *nutterer*. It also had a number of pubs, one of which hired me as a barman.

Pubs are not dark, seedy pickup joints like American bars; they fill a wide range of social roles including family eatery, but mainly they are just places where everyone hangs out together; the Stanley Arms was no different. I served lawyers sitting elbow-to-elbow with lorry drivers and college girls. There was a reassuringly regular set of faces at the bar every afternoon, discussing the local news and politics and generally keeping the civic life of Preston humming along. I couldn't think of a social institution in my own country that filled quite the same role as the pub.

Another difference between pubs and American bars is the amount of beer splashed around. I've seen some American barmen spill more beer while pouring a single glass than I was allowed to spill in an entire shift. The landlord at this pub was so careful with his stock that he would collect the beer from the drip trays at the end of the night and filter it back into the keg. Apparently this is a widespread practice, and while somewhat dubious from a sanitation perspective, it shows an admirable frugality.

That far away from London, I finally got to be something of a novelty. When people found out I was American, we usually had a conversation something like this:

"American, eh? So, is it true that everything's bigger in America?"

"Mmm. I guess ..."

"Yeah, I heard in America you can get a hamburger so big it hangs off the plate!"

"Oh, I don't know about all that."

They were right, of course, but I didn't want to talk about it much. I was loath to play the loud, braggart American; perhaps I was embarrassed to admit the way my countrymen lived. Cars were smaller in Europe, because the roads were smaller and the gasoline wickedly expensive. A normal-sized refrigerator in Europe was the same as a "mini-fridge" in the States. Portions in restaurants were adequate, not comically enormous. Many things were smaller and more efficient; an aversion to waste seemed to be a particularly cherished English value. And while I'm sure many of my English companions would have loved to tuck into a gut-bustingly huge hamburger, the cultural norms dictated they consume only what they needed. This seemed to me an inherently more right way to live, and I reveled in it.

I lived in Preston for over four months. Some time during that period I moved my clothes from the great green backpack into a regular cabinet, and began to feel quite at home. So was I still traveling? Many backpackers would say that independent travel in Europe consists of getting on a train every two or three days and heading off to sample a new city and hang out with different Australians. I found that part of my trip quite fun, of course; I got my chance to see all those storybook castles and old churches I'd read about growing up. But I look back on my time living in London and, even more so, in Preston, as the most authentic and successful "traveling" I did.

In her essay "Travels With Chekov," Janet Malcolm expresses this same sentiment: "travel itself is a low-key emotional experience, a pallid affair in comparison with ordinary life." It's a bit of a traveler's heresy, but she's right. Backpacking across Europe, I moved across a lot of space, but I saw much of it through a train window. As

exciting as the journey was at the time, I remember it hazily, as if it were something I'd seen on TV. The most memorable parts of my trip are the times when I wasn't moving at all, but consciously trying to fit into the unfamiliar place I found myself in.

I've seen this called "immersion travel," but I came to think of it as "chameleon travel": trying to blend in. I didn't just want to understand this place I was visiting; I wanted to melt into Preston, really belong there, be unidentifiable as a foreigner, and especially not as a Yank. Even though I lived with other foreigners, I spent most of my time with the young barmen from the Stanley Arms. They were proper English lads, and they really helped me try to fit in: took me to the best kebab shops, taught me about football ("It's not soccer!"), showed me how to roll a spliff, got me drunker than I ever wish to be again. And by the end, my act was getting pretty good. I even developed a sort of quasi-British accent, which for some reason most patrons at the pub took for Irish. I figured Ireland and California were in the same direction, so I didn't correct most of them.



Henry Miller was perhaps America's most bitter expatriate writer. He lived in Paris for nearly ten years, but in 1939, seeing that war was imminent, he grudgingly returned to the States. The product of that return is *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*; in the preface he describes his disgust upon arriving in Boston after so much time away: "It was like following in the wake of a demented giant who had sown the earth with crazy dreams. ... It was a vast jumbled waste created by pre-human or sub-human monsters

in a delirium of greed. ... It was a bad dream." I felt more or less the same way upon my homecoming.

Around November, I realized that I had to return to my university in January or I would be unable to reenroll. That threat, together with the bleak prospects available to an illegal immigrant, was enough to make me drag out the mighty green backpack, kiss Marina goodbye, and book a flight home. I did all this reluctantly, because I had come to love England, and in particular Preston, very much. And I was frightened by the prospect of going back to a place I had come to see as so violent, confusing, and profligate.

At the tail end of *Travels With Charley*, John Steinbeck notes how a trip can be *over* before it physically ends, or vice versa: "many a trip continues long after movement in time and space have ceased." My trip was over, but the journey wasn't ready to give up. I had heard of people having *reverse culture shock* when returning home, but I was in no way prepared for what I felt. Henry Miller describes being "brought back, like a runaway slave" to America; I knew what he meant. I would later feel an odd, faint sympathy with John Walker Lindh (the "American Taliban") being forcibly flown back to his homeland. I was a little like that, minus the burlap sack over my head.

I flew into Colorado to visit my parents, and right away I saw disturbing things. My mother's refrigerator seemed like the biggest appliance I had ever seen; it was so deep I couldn't even see the food in back. My parents' car seemed impossibly long and wide. One day after eating lunch, we got in that car and rode 100 yards across a parking lot to go shopping. There was nothing within walking distance in their suburban

neighborhood; when I couldn't convince someone to drive me, I was trapped inside the house. I was horrified.

Returning to my university, things didn't much improve. I didn't feel the same commonality with my classmates as I once had. I had changed while they hadn't. It wasn't that I held myself as better than them; it was just that I had tasted the apple and couldn't go back. I knew from firsthand experience that there were other ways of life than the American one: ways of life I saw as healthier. There were lessons I wanted to bring back to my countrymen. But the first thing you learn upon returning from an amazing trip is that nobody *really* wants to hear the revelations you had while you were gone. So I settled for trying to seem as foreign and mysterious as possible, and plotting to take another trip – maybe even emigrate. I'm not sure whether I was hooked on the feeling of being an exotic outsider, or just didn't want to be associated with this bizarre place I had come home to.



Henry Miller eventually settled in Big Sur, and it seems that he made some sort of peace with America. I knew I would have to do likewise, but I now suspect it's going to be a lifelong process. Even before I traveled, I felt myself falling out of synch with the prevailing values of this country, and spending time away from America tore that fracture wide open.

For a long time all I could think about was escape; the only way I could see to make things right was to withdraw my participation from a deeply flawed society and live somewhere else – anywhere – as a blissful expat. I can probably be thankful that

when I changed my major from Architecture to English it pushed back my graduation date. That half-finished degree was what held me in California; I seethed as I studied.

But as I grew a couple years older, I began to soften toward this land I had learned to despise. I slowly realized that in all my seething and railing against America, I was hurting the people around me in small ways with my bitterness. That wasn't my style; I could remember being better than that.

One summer I dusted off my "man of the earth" identity from the lettuce fields and planted a big organic garden. I find it hard to explain to non-gardeners the power this activity had for reconciling me to my country. In a sense, it was a nod to my Okie ancestors: my own granola-munching way of carrying on their tradition. And when you've worked the earth with your hands and fed yourself with the produce that springs up from it, you can't help but feel a little attachment to a place. Oh, also I discovered microbrews: American beers that actually taste like beer. That helped too.

Under the influence of such therapeutic activities, I eventually accepted the hard truth that the USA is my birthplace and my homeland, and it will always have a claim on me. "My native country was full of youthful promise:" that's what Washington Irving wrote in 1815, and it's still true. I was ignoring and squandering that potential. I didn't have any business abandoning my homeland, no matter how uncomfortable I was with the way of life here. My business was to care for and tend and nurture that homeland just like I do my seedlings, in the faith that America can still rise to its incredible potential. Slowly I've found a few small, practical ways to do that: political

activism, volunteer work, and simply sharing ideas with like-minded people. It's not enough; just a start.

Don't think this means I'm giving up travel. No sir. I'll travel outside the country again, maybe for years at a stretch. But America has to remain my homeland. I've learned I can't allow travel to be an escapist act, but it can be one of the tools I use: the scratch paper on which I take notes about other ways of life, gather new ideas and insights, and work out ways to live at peace with my American identity. I still have tons of things to see, thousands of people to meet, dozens of identities to try on, a whole stack of scratch paper lives to live.