

My Back Pages #7

Rich Lynch

My Back Pages #7

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

I remember the exact moment. It was 37 years ago, about a year-and-a-half after my wife Nicki and I had moved to Tennessee from northern New York State. I had been reading an issue of *Analog* magazine when I came across an announcement for a science fiction convention in Nashville. Invited guests included one of my favorite writers and one of my favorite artists, so we attended. It was truly an entertaining event. We ended up meeting many people who became our friends, and it's fair to say that weekend launched us on a journey that has not yet ended.

Seems appropriate, then, to structure this issue as a personal journey, with essays that span more than half a century of my life. First up is the description of an *actual* journey I began at the start of 2011 that will have, by 2016, taken me completely across North America. Sort of.

Rich Lynch

Gaithersburg, Maryland

April 2012

CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE

The Journey	3
previously published in <i>The Drink Tank</i> 300 (November 2011)	
Just Like in Cowboy Movies	5
previously published [in a slightly different form] in <i>Mimosa</i> 4 (April 1988)	
The Day I Went Nuclear	6
previously published in <i>Argentus</i> 11 (November 2011)	
London 2009	8
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 72 (November 2009)	
Portraits of New York	12
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 86 (March 2012)	
Thrilling Vomit Stories	18
previously published in <i>In Search of Enlightenment</i> (September 25, 2004)	
A Portrait of the Fan Editor as a Child	19
previously published in <i>Mimosa</i> 15 (April 1994)	
The Law of Conservation of Karma and Other Conspiracy Theories	21
previously published in <i>Challenger</i> 24 (Summer 2006)	
Notes on a Postcard Diary Not Written	23
previously published in <i>This is Not a Minacine</i> 89 (November 1998)	
Other Places, Other Fandoms	27
previously published in <i>Mimosa</i> 25 (April 2000)	
My Plans for Screenwriting Stardom	29
previously published in <i>In Search of Enlightenment</i> (March 11, 2005)	

‘Worldcon’ and ‘Hugo Award’ are service marks of the World Science Fiction Society.

P.O. Box 3120, Gaithersburg, Maryland 20885 USA; rw_lynch (at) yahoo (dot) com

The Journey

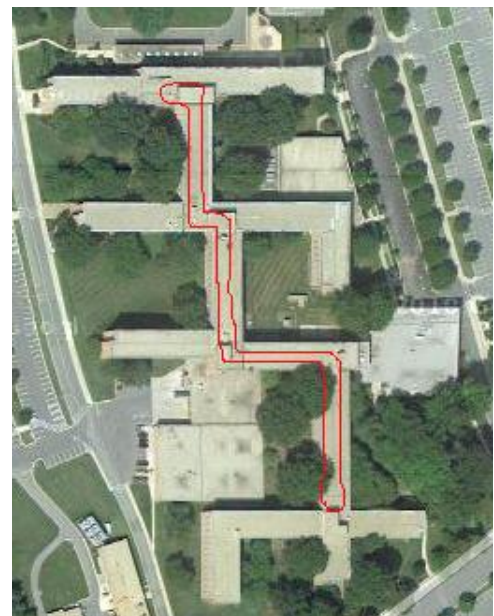
It all began with an offhand comment to me by the boss way back in January: “You *really* need to get out from behind your desk more often!”

With all the cold winter weather, I’d been teleconferencing interagency meetings of interest down in D.C. instead of going to them. It’s much more efficient for time use to do a teleconference instead of doing the 30 mile commute into downtown Washington. But it’s also a lot more difficult, at least for me, to learn anything useful from a very large audio-only meeting than actually being there in person. And by not attending, it decreases the visibility (and thereby the importance) of the organization I work for, which is one of those intangibles that comes into play come annual budget time. It was good advice.

But I have to admit that for a few seconds I interpreted the comment as “Maybe you should think about getting more exercise.” I had been getting way too sedentary, and it was starting to show. Not only that, I still have the notion, someday, of resuming karate (after a mere 30 years), and unless I get a bit more in shape there’s no way I’d be able to.

So I decided to do some walking. It’s one of the lowest impact forms of exercise there is, which makes it ideal to do while I’m at work. My workplace is the old Atomic Energy Commission building, built back in the 1950s at the start of the Cold War. They located it well north of Washington so it could be a safe haven in case of World War III, and the design was intended to provide protection from atomic bomb blast waves from the south. There are several long intersecting corridors and it was fairly easy to measure off a walking loop. Three times around is a mile, and since the route takes me up and down stairs it is even somewhat aerobic.

But I didn’t want this to be a short-term fad that I’d give up after a month or so. I knew that sooner or later inertia would set in and it would become all too easy to find some reason to forgo walking for a day, two days, a week... For me at least, I know that to stick with any open-ended repetitive activity, it helps to make a game of it. So I decided to keep track of the total miles I’ve walked and I even set what I hope are achievable mileage goals. Only the miles walked in my building count toward these goals, and once a walk has started there’s no going back into my office until after a full mile is complete.



the AEC building (with my walking route)

It took a bit of thought to come up with some interesting mileage goals, and in the end I relied on the help of Google Maps. One of the options is “Get Directions” and it will plot out, in great detail, a walking route between any two points. The virtual destination I chose was the Embassy Suites Hotel in Huntsville, Alabama – the site of the 50th anniversary DeepSouthCon next June. The walking distance is very close to 700 miles from where I live in Maryland so the first goal is to complete 700 miles before the start of the convention.

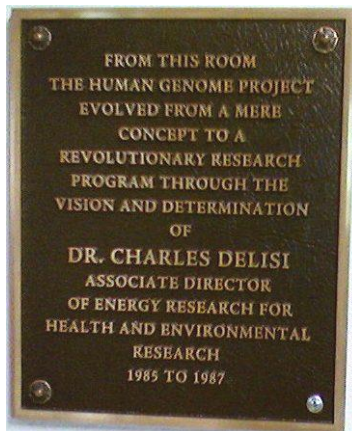
Turns out I will make it with plenty of time to spare. I've found that I'm good for three and often four miles a day – one before the work day begins, one after it ends, one at the beginning of lunch break, and on days when there's a manageable amount of work to do, one at the end of lunch break. As of mid September, I've been at it for more than eight months and I just passed 500 miles walked, which 'places' me on route US-11 just west of Knoxville, Tennessee. At this rate I should 'arrive' in Huntsville not quite one year after this long walk started and well in advance of the convention.



a basement corridor in the
AEC building

But that's not going to be the end of this virtual Walk Across America. The next mileage goal is the distance from Huntsville to New Orleans, and after that to San Antonio ('arriving' before the 2013 Worldcon). And from there it would be on westward to Los Angeles and then up the coast ending in San Francisco at the Sentinel Building.

This is no doubt the most over-the-top thing I've tried in a very long time, but it may actually be do-able. The total distance to be covered is right at about 3,500 miles. At my current rate, if I can maintain it (and no guarantee on that), I would 'arrive' in San Francisco toward the end of 2015. If I can persist that long I'm going to fly out to San Francisco to share a bottle of wine with my virtual self at Café Zoetrope.



plaque outside room F-202

Meanwhile, it's one mile at a time, around and around. It's actually not as boring as it sounds and there was even some history to discover, like the commemorative plaque outside room F-202 that describes the genesis of a visionary science program.

And there's more. Several weeks in I decided the walk wasn't challenging enough, so now each mile includes a lot more stairs, including two tough 79-step 'stairway to heaven' climbs from the basement level up to the fourth floor. The end result is an elevation change of more than 100 feet (both up and down) per mile. My running total for the entire walk so far is about 48,000 feet, and when I 'reach' San Francisco, I will have both climbed and descended a virtual altitude of about 65 miles, which is higher than what is defined as the 'edge of space'.

Years ago at a meeting, someone accused me, in jest, of wanting to be a space cadet. Maybe he was right! ☼

Afterword:

I 'arrived' in Huntsville just before the end of 2011 and as of the beginning of April my total is a bit more than 900 miles walked, which 'locates' me very close to the Alabama-Mississippi border about 240 miles from New Orleans.

One of the places this virtual Walk Across America has taken me is Chattanooga, Tennessee, where Nicki and I lived for 15 years before we moved to Maryland. I arrived in Chattanooga, in the flesh, back in October 1973, and my first evening in town was unforgettable, to say the least!

Just Like in Cowboy Movies

I still remember that evening like it was yesterday. I'd just arrived in Chattanooga after a long drive from the wilderness of northern New York State, and after checking into my hotel I decided to drive around a bit to get the lay of the land. And maybe find someplace to get a burger and a beer. It took a while, but after going down a little side street I finally found what seemed to be an affordable place. It even looked reasonably homey, with all the pick-up trucks parked outside.

But once I was inside I realized things might not be what they appeared, because it seemed just about everybody else was wearing hats and boots. Some guys even had on bib overalls. And most of them were a lot bigger and bulkier than I was. But what the heck – I was hungry, I was already in there, and I was minding my own business. So what could happen?

There weren't many tables so I ordered at the bar and I had just gotten my beer when, just like in old cowboy movies, the door swung open and in lurched this goliath of a person. He looked obviously intoxicated, and the first thing he said after he took a look around the bar was, "Ah do declare ah'm a gone-tuh *whup* averbody in-a-here!"

And he was looking right at me when he said it.

"Aw hell," I thought. "First night in town and I'm about to get the crap pounded out of me." But then this equally massive guy standing next to me – and he hadn't said a single word the entire time I'd been in there – picked up his drink and, like John Wayne, gulped it down and *slammed* the empty down on the bar. He turned around, looked the drunken galoot up and down, and said, "Wal, ah'm in a hurry, so whyn't ya start with me first."

At that point I remember being very, very thankful somebody decided to be proactive.

So anyway, they went right at it, and when I saw that the rest of the patrons in there looked like they all wanted a piece of the action, I did a quick sidestep around the fight and got out of there. As I was driving away I could hear police sirens, and the only thing I could think of was, "Welcome to Tennessee!" ☀



almost, but not quite, what I witnessed close up

Afterword:

I should mention that I'm usually more intelligent than that. And I *did* become a whole lot better at identifying redneck bars!

Chattanooga became Nicki's and my home for almost 15 years. I spent almost half that time working for private industry, and in the middle of 1980 I became a U.S. Government employee when I accepted an offer from the Tennessee Valley Authority. My eight years at TVA were some of the best in my professional career, and I became involved in interesting projects that resulted in some very unusual adventures!

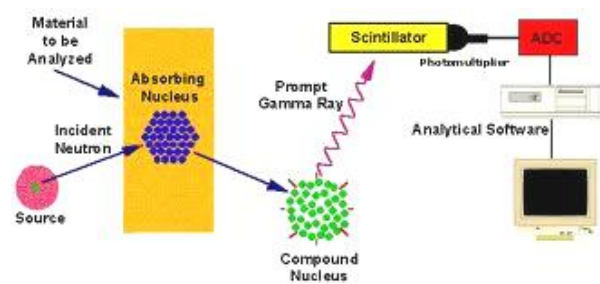
The Day I Went Nuclear

It's been just about 25 years since it happened, but the memory is as fresh as if it was yesterday.

Back then I was still living in Chattanooga and working for the Tennessee Valley Authority. The projects I was involved in often took me to the wilds of central Kentucky where one of TVA's largest coal-fired power plants was located. The power plant had just finished construction of a new front-end coal beneficiation facility, as part of its compliance to Clean Air Act regulations, so that the relatively inexpensive high sulfur coal mined nearby could continue to be burned.

The coal beneficiation plant was actually just a big separation process where mineral matter that contained most of the sulfur could be separated from the actual coal by a simple float-sink procedure. The density of the separation liquid (finely-ground magnetite slurry with water) could be adjusted to fine tune the process to where a minimal amount of the high density sulfur-containing material was accepted and a minimal amount of the lower density carboniferous material was rejected. But to make it all work properly, some process control was needed.

That's where I came in. A new technology had just been developed that could, in theory at least, do a real-time elemental analysis on bulk quantities of the 'washed' coal. It was called 'prompt gamma neutron activation analysis' – the way it worked was that sulfur and other elements in the coal emit gamma rays of various energy levels after absorbing neutrons from a californium-252 source, and the resulting gamma ray spectrum can be computer analyzed to determine the relative abundance of each element. The idea was that the results could be used for feedback control of the beneficiation plant.



In practice, it was a lot more difficult than that. A contractor had developed a prototype, but it turned out to be something much more suited to a pristine laboratory than a dirty coal processing plant. I was lead engineer of the group that was given charge of the analyzer, and to keep it going we had to redevelop the device as the project proceeded. We eventually ended up with a hardened device that could mostly do the job it was intended for, but by then the californium neutron source had decayed to the point where it needed to be changed out.

When working with nuclear materials, nothing is easy or trivial. We had obtained the neutron source on loan from Oak Ridge National Laboratory and that's where it had to be returned. So we brought in a big and bulky shipping cask, and at that point the TVA nuclear safety people got involved with instructions and indoctrinations of various kinds. The source itself was small, about two inches in length and maybe half an inch in diameter. There were several layers of inert metal cladding to seal in the californium, but we were nevertheless told we had to do a 'wipe test' of the source, once it was extracted from the analyzer, to make sure none of the radioactive material had leaked. One other thing we were told was that, because of the design and location of the analyzer, we would have to do an air transfer of the source to get it into the shipping cask.

It turned out, no surprise, that there weren't any written procedures for air transfers of californium neutron sources – we had to make up one that fit our specific circumstances. And Step #1 was that I, as lead project engineer, was the one to do the transfer. So come the day of the big event, there I was, holding one end of a 20-foot length of quarter-inch all-thread, with the other end screwed into the source which was still safely entombed in the analyzer. The nuclear safety guy had taped a small piece of textile of some kind to the side of a nearby conveyor, and had skedaddled after telling me that once I had extracted the source I needed to rub it against that cloth before I did *anything* else. My plan was to pull the source out, give it a quick wipe on the fabric, and then also skedaddle – out of the building and through a narrow passage between buildings to the field where the cask was located. A total distance of no more than about 100 feet. It looked fairly easy, and so I thought to myself, “Let’s do this!”

I remember that just before I pulled the source out of the analyzer I had taken a glance at the radiation counter the nuclear safety guy had left behind, which was placidly and audibly detecting background radiation...*tick...tick...tick*. But as I extracted the source, the counter went into catatonic shock: *tick...tick..tick.tick.TICK.TICK.TICK.TI.TI.T.T.T.EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE*

“Ohhhhhhh, crap!” I thought. The needle on the counter’s dial had pegged all the way over and the counter was making this horrible loud shrieking noise. But that was the least of my worries. The twenty-foot length of all-thread was flexing and waving around like a giant insect antenna, and it was damn near impossible to control the position of the nuclear source at the far end of it. My first attempt at completing the wipe test didn’t get the source within three feet of the cloth. It took six tries to get it done, and while that was going on my sense of time became so distorted it seemed like an hour had passed. I finally managed to very briefly touch the source to the cloth, at which point I decided, “The hell with this!” and got out of there.

It didn’t take me very long to get the source to the cask. One of my co-workers later told me he had never seen me move so fast. We were able to quickly seal off the source, and that was that. In spite of all the unexpected machinations, it turned out that I hadn’t received any significant amount of radiation from this escapade – despite the radiation counter’s sound and fury, the nuclear source really *had* decayed to where it was unusable.

As I mentioned, all that happened a quarter of a century ago. I’ve long since moved north to Maryland and settled into a new career as a government bureaucrat, or whatever it is an international trade specialist in the federal employ is called. The reason the memory stays fresh with me is actually because of rock music. The most popular song of the British rock band The Who is “Won’t Get Fooled Again”, which gets played very, very often on Classic Rock Radio and is now even the theme music for one of the *CSI* television shows.

You know, it’s amazing how much Roger Daltrey’s signature scream just before the end of the song sounds like a pegged-out radiation counter! ☀

Afterword:

It was in September 1988 that Nicki and I moved north to the Washington, D.C. area so that I could accept a position at the U.S. Department of Energy. I’ve been at DOE ever since then and for about the past decade-and-a-half, as I mentioned in the article above, I’ve been working mostly as an international trade specialist. This has taken me to many places, including a trip in October 2009 to one of the most interesting cities in the world.

London 2009

Prolog: Magical Mystery Tour

I had thought Octobers in London are chilly but this was a warm and pleasant afternoon. It was the first day of what was to be a very tiring week-long business trip, and to take advantage of what little personal time we would have, my compatriot John and I decided to take a walk to see a famed and iconic location.

It's seemed to me, at various times this year, that I've been on some kind of 'magical mystery tour' that brings me to places made famous by the Beatles. Back in January it was a chilly visit to the John Lennon 'Strawberry Fields' memorial in New York City, while in August I walked right past the entrance to the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal where John and Yoko held their famous 'bed-in for peace' back in 1969. But this time I had come to a place that is the gold standard for fans of the Fab Four – the street crossing that was used in the cover photo of a 1969 album cover. We were at Abbey Road.



John and me at a famous street crossing

We had originally wanted to recreate the cover, or some close approximation of it. Two others who were there for the meeting had 'come together' with us for the walk, but one of them chickened out from being in the photo and the other turned out to be the best photographer. In the end it was just the two of us, but it's probably just as well we decided to skip an exact recreation. I'm left-handed so I would have been Paul, who was barefoot in the photo. I admire historical accuracy, but there *are* some limits to what I'll do for that!

The View from the Eye in the Sky

The London meeting had been in planning for well over a year. It was another of the international conferences on carbon sequestration but its importance had been ramped up quite a bit because it was a Ministerial meeting, attended by Energy Ministers and other high-ranking people from all over the world including U.S. Secretary of Energy Steven Chu. This translated to much more work for me, both before and at the meeting, as I am part of the organization that staged the event. The last few days during the roll-up to the meeting, in particular, are not



me and John at the meeting

something I want to repeat any time soon from all the short turnaround action items that kept descending on us and the elevated stress levels that inevitably resulted.

And yet, it could have been worse. As difficult as the weeks prior to the meeting had been, things went fairly smoothly in London. The U.K. meeting hosts had also arranged two evening events for all the attendees that were pretty effective in allowing us to decompress after a very long day. One of these was a trip to the London Eye. At 135 meters tall, it is the largest Ferris Wheel in Europe, and at 3 million paid visitors per year (at £15 per person), it is the most lucrative tourist attraction in the United Kingdom.

The big machine is actually a mechanical marvel. The hub is supported by an A-frame



London Eye, after the flight



View from my hotel window toward downtown London
— London Eye faintly visible on horizon

cantilever so that there is no support structure to impede the view of the Thames River. It moves at a stately speed of one revolution every half hour, which is slow enough that does not need to stop to take on passengers (and does so, only briefly, when a disabled passenger boards or disembarks). The passenger capsules each hold up to 25 people, and they are designed so that their connection to the big wheel allows them to also rotate at 2RPH in the direction opposite to the wheel. Which is good – otherwise the floor of the capsule would not remain level.

It was quite an experience to take a ‘flight’ on the Eye. The capsules are completely enclosed with plenty of windows, and passengers

can move about freely. I never felt a real sense of motion at any time, but it was impressive to see the Palace of Westminster and the Big Ben clock tower from above.

London is a spectacular city from any angle of view, but the one I had for a few minutes from the Eye, in the sky, was unique.



Palace of Westminster and Big Ben Clock Tower from the London Eye

Other Views of London

But there are other equally good ways to see London. One of them is by boat. The last day of the trip, after the wrap-up meeting ended, John and I decided to take a sightseeing cruise on the Thames. The skies were clear, the weather was warm, and the views were splendid.

After that we had to make some choices for rest of the day, and the possibilities were way more than what we could do with the time available. The finalists were two of the most iconic sights of London – the Tower Bridge and St. Paul’s Cathedral. In the end, St. Paul’s won out, mostly because it was closer to the boat dock. It’s certainly an imposing sight close-up. The building, especially the imposing dome, is reminiscent



Tower Bridge as seen during river cruise



St. Paul's Cathedral from the Millennium Bridge

of St. Peter's in Vatican City. It was designed by the great British architect, Sir Christopher Wren, to replace a church that had been destroyed in the London fire of 1666. Next year will be the 300th anniversary of its completion. We elected not to tour the inside because it would have taken at least two hours that we didn't really have in order to see it all. And there would have been a lot to see. St. Paul's has a world-famous whispering gallery, some truly awe-inspiring woodwork and ironwork, tombs of such notables as Admiral Nelson and Sir Arthur Sullivan, and a climb of more than 500 steps, all the way to a cupola at the top of the dome, to what is described as the best overall view of London. But that can't really be true – up there is one of the few places in London where you can't see St. Paul's!

Underground London

I am convinced that the best way to get around London is via the London Underground, a.k.a. 'The Tube'. There are about a dozen different lines that pass through central London, and very few locations are more than a few blocks from a tube station. The network is necessarily complex, but it's not really all that daunting if you have a good tourist map that shows the locations of the all the lines and stations.

For our free day, John and I had purchased all-day passes which paid for themselves after about the second ride. Usually, the only difficulty we had was finding the most efficient way to get from one place to another. It turned out to be easier, for example, to take the District Line from Embankment to Cannon Street and walk about four blocks to St Paul's rather than change trains at Monument to the Central Line to go to the much closer St. Paul's station. We were lucky that the Edgware Road station on the Bakerloo Line was less than a block from our hotel, which saved us a 10-minute walk from the Marylebone Station, near where the meeting was taking place. But that worked against me once, when the elevator from the Edgware Road station to street level wasn't working and it was a long 125 step climb to get out of there.



wall mosaic at the Baker Street station

The one downside to the London Underground system is that it's not very picturesque (in fact, many stations are downright dingy). But there are still a few sights to take in while transiting the system. One of them is a wall mosaic at the Baker Street station, of a famous fictional character who resided near there.



with Peter the singing station attendant

And the Underground could even have its amusing moments. A memorable one happened at the Mansion House station, when John and I were momentarily confused about what platform we needed to be on. One of the station attendants came over to help and when he found out that John was originally from Chicago he broke into a passable Sinatra imitation of "My Kind of Town". You just don't get that kind of entertainment on the Washington Metro!

Epilog

No epilog this time, other than: I suppose there are more interesting cities in the world than London. But I can't think of any. ☀

Afterword:

I only wish I could visit London more often. Next opportunity probably will not be for at least another couple of years. Luckily, there is an equally interesting city only a few hours away by train and Nicki and I make that short journey annually, usually in January to escape the crowds and high prices. Our most recent trip there, just a few months ago, resulted in the discovery of many new perspectives and portraits of a truly great metropolis.

Portraits of New York

Prolog: Paint Your Palette Blue and Grey

I *like* art museums, I really do! And I've had the privilege of visiting many great ones in my adult life. There are at least three of them in New York City, but only one is home to one of Vincent Van Gogh's most famous paintings.

I'm referring to "The Starry Night", of course. It's at MOMA, the Museum of Modern Art, which is located just a *few* blocks from the hotel where Nicki and I have stayed during our annual January mini-vacations in New York. This was my first time at MOMA, mostly to see the Van Gogh blue and grey masterwork but also to discover some of the other famous paintings that reside there.



a starry night inside MOMA



Dali's "The Persistence of Memory" over the shoulder of a photographer

There's no lack of them. Henri Rousseau's "The Sleeping Gypsy" and "The Dream" are both there, as are Pablo Picasso's "The Young Ladies of Avignon" and "Three Musicians", and Piet Mondrian's geometric "Broadway Boogie-Woogie". The largest of all the masterworks, by far, is Claude Monet's "Reflections of Clouds on the Water Lily Pond" which is six feet tall and over 40 feet wide. And one of the smallest is also one of the most famous: Salvador Dali's surreal and Zen-like masterpiece "The Persistence of Memory". It measures only 13-inches wide by 10-inches tall, but on a per-square-inch basis it was the most popular painting on exhibit.

MOMA allows non-flash photography, and

there was a rugby scrum of people scrambling to position themselves for the perfect keepsake photo. It was entertaining, in a perverse way, to watch all the jockeying for position, all for about three seconds in front of the painting. So *my* keepsake photo was actually a meta-photograph, of another photographer during his few seconds of prime time with the painting.

Anyway, the moment also seemed very Zen-like. I'd like to think Dali would have agreed.

Catch the Breeze and the Winter Chills

Winter may be the best time of the year to visit New York City, though I expect many if not most people would *not* agree. New York in January is certainly a breezy, chilly experience. But consider this: winter is 'low season' for New York, as much as there is one. In January, hotel room rates are as low as they get (ours was less than \$180 a night) and it's much easier to get into many of the city's attractions.

Nicki and I arrived in New York just a couple of days after the New Year. We had actually considered scheduling the trip for mid December, as I still had a week's annual leave I had to use before the end of 2011. But just a couple of weeks make a big difference. The hotel room we stayed in would have been nearly twice as expensive in mid December. Not only that, a reminder in the room stated that the 'rack rate', which was no doubt in effect on New Year's Eve just three days earlier, was more than \$700 a night! Timing is everything.

And, from a weather perspective, the timing of this year's trip was spot on. One week later there was lots of rain, but all during our stay the skies were clear. As we approached New York on the train ride from Maryland we could see that the city's skyline had changed in the year since our previous visit. There was a big new skyscraper under construction!

Eyes that Watch the World and Can't Forget

Nicki and I had previously gone to see Ground Zero, the site of the 9/11 attack, in the summer of 2008 on our very first mini-vacation to New York City. Back then it was just a fenced-off construction site that looked pretty much like every other urban construction site, except that it was much, much bigger.

In the nearly five years since then, a lot has happened. Several new buildings are on the rise, including a dramatic new glass-walled edifice that will dominate the skyline once it is completed. It's the Freedom Tower.

The formal name of the building was changed in 2009 to the pedestrian "One World Trade Center" (or "1WTC"), but it's still the same building, after many revisions, whose design was selected through a competition in 2002. It won't be until later in 2012 before the building is topped out, but already it is very impressive and imposing.



the new 1WTC tower,
under construction



one of the waterfall pools at the 9/11 Memorial

But what we actually came to see was the new 9/11 Memorial. There are two deep waterfall reflecting pools that occupy the ground where the twin towers stood, and names of the victims killed in 9/11 terrorist attacks are inscribed in the bronze parapets that surround the pools. In spite of the large number of visitors there we found it a very quiet place, with only the sound of the falling water. Already it's a place where people are coming to quietly meditate about what happened there.

The Memorial not yet fully completed – a museum will open within another year that will have more than 100,000 square feet of exhibition space for artifacts from the towers, as well as archives and multimedia displays. It will be a place to gain a better understanding of everything that happened on that day we will never forget.

I Know What You Tried to Say to Me

A different edifice, much smaller than 1WTC, was also on our list of places to visit. The Brill Building, located on Broadway just north of Times Square, was a center of American popular music in the early 1960s. Carole King, Gerry Goffin, Neil Sedaka, Burt Bacharach, Hal David, Laura Nyro, Neil Diamond, Tommy Boyce, Paul Simon, and many other songwriters composed some of the most familiar songs of that era in there. Two decades earlier, in the Big Band era, a lot of the music popularized by the orchestras of Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, and the Dorsey brothers was written there.

In my mind's eye I can imagine what it must have been like a half century ago, with songwriters holed up in various corners of the building trying out new melodies and lyrics. Today it's a lot different. The place is now a mundane office building, and while it still hosts a music recording company and a television production company, all the songwriting activity has long since departed the scene.



the Brill Building

Nicki and I looked for a commemorative plaque of some kind about the building, but there didn't appear to be one anywhere in the lobby or out on the street. But it didn't really matter. The music of the early 1960s was a big part of my teenage life. Being there, among the ghosts of the Brill Building, actually did bring back a lot of memories from long ago.

For One as Beautiful as You

The Brill Building and its wonderful art deco facade date back to 1931. Just one year earlier, several blocks away, another building renown for its art deco exterior was completed – the Chrysler Building. When it was completed it was the tallest building in the world, but held that distinction for less than a year

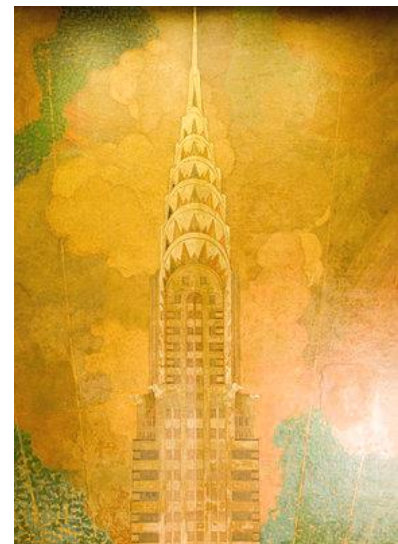
when it was surpassed by the Empire State Building.

The Chrysler Building is unique because of its elegant and photogenic spire, but the inside is also impressive.

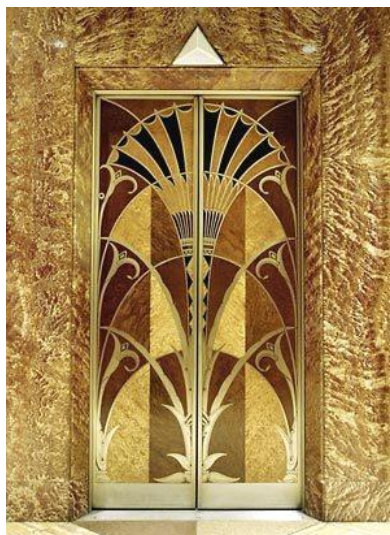
The ceiling of the three-story lobby is a mural created by artist Edward Trumbull titled “Transport and Human Endeavor” that depicts



more of the ceiling mural



part of the ceiling mural in the Chrysler Building's lobby



Chrysler Building elevator door

airplanes, the Chrysler automobile assembly line, and the Chrysler building itself. Just seeing that as Nicki and I entered the building was pretty awe-inspiring, but the rest of the lobby, with its rich dark African marble, was equally so. Even the elevator doors are works of art, with inlays of brass and exotic hardwoods.

It was an enlightening experience to see only this much of the building. There's more I wish I could have seen. As the name of the building would indicate, the Chrysler Corporation once had its headquarters here. About 50 stories up are metal gargoyles that were modeled after some of Chrysler's automobile hood ornaments. There was once an observation deck where these were visible fairly close-up. But it, like the short-lived record of 'world's tallest', was a victim of the Empire State Building, whose higher observation deck caused the Chrysler Building's management to redevelop that level into more office space.

We weren't there very long, but it was time well spent. I'd read that the Chrysler Building is one of the most beautiful modern structures in existence. As far as I'm concerned, it more than lived up to its billing.

The Ragged Men in Ragged Clothes

Once in a while, something in New York fails to live up to its billing. Case in point is *The Fantasticks*. I'd always wanted to see it because of its sterling pedigree – over the years, famous actors who have appeared in it include Jerry Orbach, Lisa Minnelli, Elliott Gould, F. Murray Abraham, Glenn Close, and Kristen Chenoweth. And it also has one of the great songs of musical theater, "Try to Remember".

I was expecting a really good show... and it wasn't. One problem was the production values, which were so small they were almost invisible. *The Fantasticks* is an 'Off-Broadway' musical, which means that it's being staged in a very small theater. So small that the back row of the theater, where Nicki and I were sitting, was only five rows from the stage. But the theater was so small that the stage itself was tiny – it was maybe twelve feet square, and the only props were a few cardboard cutouts, several upright metal pipes, a multi-purpose storage chest, and a backless wooden bench.

But an even bigger problem was that two of the actors did not demonstrate that they were very good singers. Top billing in the show went to singer/actor Aaron Carter as one of the young romantics. He was understandably trying to expand his craft when he took on the role, but his voice, while suitable for a recording studio, was woefully underpowered for live musical theater.



the stage of *The Fantasticks* from the back row

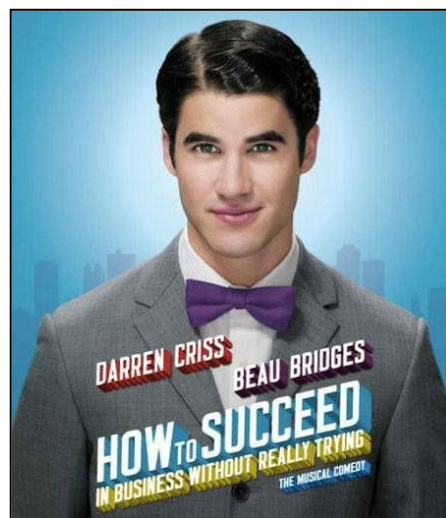
And his female lead counterpart was, if anything, even worse. The best part of the show was the two actors who played the disheveled fathers of the two young lovers – now *they* could sing!

As usual, Nicki and I spent a bit of time rehashing the show before we headed back to the hotel. On our way out of the theater, I offered that Dan Sharkey, who played the father of Aaron Carter's character, was a really entertaining actor. Immediately we heard a loud "I agree!" just behind us. We turned, and it was Mr. Sharkey. He smiled and nodded at us, and while we were standing there open-mouthed he disappeared into the night!

The Strangers That You've Met

The other two shows we saw were much, much better. We were able to get half-price tickets for *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, but the seats were way toward the back in the upper level. Darren Criss from the popular TV show *Glee* had just taken over the featured role of J. Pierrepont Finch, and the theater was overrun by all the 'Gleeks', the fans of the TV show, who had snatched up all the best seats. The week before, good seats had been plentiful for the end of the run in that same role by Daniel Radcliffe, who had previously been the star of a series of films about some young wizard.

Criss is certainly a good singer, and he was very entertaining as the window washer who found clever ways to rapidly climb the corporate ladder. As has he in advancing his own acting and singing career. In just a bit more than three years he has gone from graduation at the University of Michigan to having his much-larger-than-life portrait surrounded by lights in Times Square. As they say in show biz, the kid definitely has a future.



outside the Sondheim Theater on West 43rd Street

It was a very enjoyable show, and what made it even more interesting was that it was done 'retro', with decades-old references and allusions in the libretto, as if we were still in the early 1960s. The same was true with the musical we saw the following evening, *Anything Goes*. All the original Cole Porter lyrics from the 1930s were used, apparently at the insistence of his estate.

And speaking of *Anything Goes*, I'll just come right out and say it – it was the best Broadway show I have ever seen. As good as *How to Succeed* was, *Anything Goes* was better yet, with an amusing storyline (set aboard a trans-Atlantic ocean liner), talented actors, many great songs, and some rather amazing extended dance sequences. There was also no lack of star power on stage. Sutton

Foster, who won the Tony Award last year for her performance in this musical, has become the empress of musical comedy. And the great Joel Grey was in the show!

Nicki and I had a really good time, and what made it even more pleasant were the couple from Canada who were sitting next to us. They had driven down from Montreal, which is just slightly more than a stone's throw from where Nicki and I went to college in northern New York State. We had long conversations prior to the show and during the intermission, but when the house lights came up after the final curtain call we headed our separate ways. In a different universe we would have exchanged contact information and became lifelong friends, but in the here and now we decided to remain strangers.

Two days later, on the train ride back to Maryland, there was time for some 'woulda-coulda-shoulda'. But in the end, maybe this was best. It's doubtful we would have crossed paths again, and our single memory of them is now part of a very enjoyable and special evening. I hope they feel the same for us.

Epilog: Portraits Hung in Empty Halls

I think my favorite of all the masterworks at MOMA is "Christina's World" by Andrew Wyeth. It's a fairly stark image of a young woman in an empty field who appears to be struggling to make it back to the sanctuary of a distant farmhouse. I suppose there are all kinds of allegories that could be made about the painting, but what made it immediately noticeable was where it was displayed – not with the other famous paintings, but at the end of a mostly empty hallway.



with my favorite painting in MOMA

The crowds of people were amassed in front of all the other paintings, and I had as much time as I wanted to admire the work. It wasn't the easiest thing to leave – the painting kept trying to draw me back. New York will not have any trouble at all in drawing Nicki and me back again next year. We are looking forward to seeing many more portraits of this great city. ☀

(All chapter headings for this essay are lyrics from the song "Vincent" by Don McLean, Enrico Nascimbeni, and Roberto Vecchioni ©1970)

Afterword:

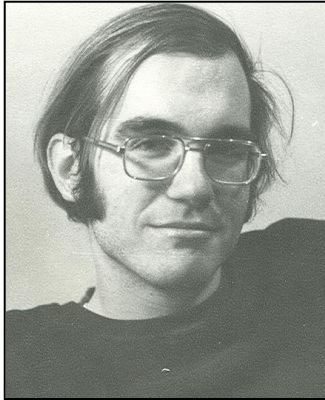
It's not that much of an exaggeration to say that where Nicki and I went to college is hardly more than a stone's throw from Montreal. Potsdam is a largish village in St. Lawrence County and is home to two colleges – a branch of the State University of New York (where Nicki was a student) and Clarkson University (which I attended). Potsdam is just over 100 miles from Montreal but is so far north in the wilderness that it's more than three times the distance of Montreal from New York City.

I was a student at Clarkson during the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, earning a Bachelor's degree in Chemical Engineering and after that a Masters in Chemistry. And I quickly found out that one of the first things you learn as an engineering student is to drink beer. Often lots of it.

Thrilling Vomit Stories

It's been quite a while, more than two decades actually since it last happened, but this morning something about breakfast disagreed with me enough that much of it came back up again. There I was, in the garage heading out to retrieve the garbage can after the week-end trash pick-up and then I was doubled over looking at a big puddle of pureed banana, cereal and milk on the concrete floor.

I absolutely *hate* to vomit – it's a phobia worse than almost anything else for me. Go ahead, confine me in some terrifying and claustrophobic dark and enclosed tunnel where I can't move forward or backward to escape, but *do not* make me so nauseous that I'll blow lunch all over the place! The last time before this that it happened was back in the 1980s on a business trip in California, when a combination of the flu and some awful Chinese food made me best friends with my hotel room's commode for about half an hour.



when I was a
graduate student

My most memorable vomit story is from my college days, of course. It happened back in the early 1970s, while I was a graduate student at Clarkson University in northern New York State, after a particularly trying day when, as I recall, I hadn't been very successful at pushing back the boundaries of science. I and a few other grad students decided to stop by the college Rathskeller for a quick beer before heading on out for the evening. But it was a Friday night and the NHL playoffs were on the TV. We stayed. Pizzas soon followed, many of them, along with pitchers of beer, many of them. By the time the third period of the game rolled around, somebody behind the bar decided that beer was now a dollar a pitcher. The Rangers were winning big and everybody was in a party mood for the weekend.

You can see where this is leading. By the time the game ended I had consumed so much beer and pizza that my stomach had long since given up trying to get in touch with my brain to let it know that it was time to stop. And then... up it all came, all over the table in the middle of the place, where I was sitting. I don't remember too much after that, except that my roomies had to come for me, took me back to our apartment and dumped me under a cold shower. They told me afterwards that I'd succeeded in clearing the place out, no mean feat for the Clarkson Rathskeller.

I realize this is probably Too Much Information, and I hope you're not reading this after a filling meal. But I can tell you that I've gained more common sense since then, and nothing like that is likely to happen again to me. Well, at least not for *another* two decades, anyway. ☀

Afterword:

It was not long after these events that I started dating Nicki, and I'd like to think she helped instill some common sense into me. I haven't lost my taste for beer, but nowadays one is usually my limit.

And now a reprint from the 'food' theme issue of *Mimosa* back in 1994, about another misadventure from even earlier in my life. The evening described in the following remembrance was more than a half century ago, but it has been ingrained in my memory ever since.

A Portrait of the Fan Editor as a Child

It has been my pleasure, in the nearly two decades I've been involved with science fiction fandom, to have met hundreds of others of you, either in person or in print. With you, my friends, I have enjoyed and experienced many good times, ranging from dinner expeditions, to sporting events, to sightseeing.

But now, I'm going to do something different. In fact, I'm about to do something I rarely ever do. I'm going to tell you about myself.

I'm not very comfortable about doing this. I can't really think of anything about me that anybody would find all that interesting, and I don't like the thought of being considered a bore or a windbag. That's made me a pretty good conversation manipulator. When I'm talking with *you*, I always gently and subtly try to steer the topic away from myself, and can usually get you to talk about *yourself*. I usually find out a lot about you, but not you about me, because you've done most of the talking and I've done the listening.

So let me tell you a few things about me that you probably didn't know; maybe I can answer a few questions you haven't been able to ask, starting with: No, I'm not an only child. I have two older sisters, and a younger brother and sister. No, none of them have ever been involved with science fiction fandom (though they all know that I am), and yes, both my older sisters bullied me mercilessly when I was just a little kid.



me and my sisters and brother, ca. 1961 (I'm at the far left)

But this essay is supposed to keep with our 'food' theme, isn't it? Well okay, then, my very first memory has to do with food – I can remember, very clearly, sitting on my grandfather's lap while he fed me a piece of bread that had the crusts cut off. And many of my most vivid childhood memories, in fact, involve food. For instance, there was The Night the Dessert Went Wrong...

It was a warm summer evening, and I had been looking forward to strawberry shortcake, which back then was just about my favorite dessert in the whole wide world. *This* night, though, was to be different – *this* night I was judged to finally be Big Enough to spray my own whipped-

cream topping from the can on my own dessert, much to my delight (and much to the envy of my younger brother, who was seated just to my left at the kitchen table).



The spray topping was in one of those pressurized cans that were so popular in the late '50s and early '60s; to get the whipped cream out, you had bend the long nozzle with your finger to release some of the pressure with some of the can's contents. Well, this looked pretty easy to me, but I was still given a stern warning to BE CAREFUL! If I made a mess, there would be *NO* television time for me later in the evening!

Well, fine! I could be careful if I needed to be. So, after vigorously shaking the can under watchful approval, I *carefully* pointed the nozzle towards the top of the shortcake, sighting along the side of the can to make sure the nozzle was aimed right at the exact center of the plate. But then anxiety set in – I couldn't wait any longer to get the topping onto my dessert. So instead of *carefully* bending the nozzle to *carefully* let out some of the whipped cream onto the short cake, I jammed it as hard as I could, and the nozzle bent sharply to the left.

The whipped cream flew out from the nozzle like a rocket exhaust, and with a noise to match. It missed the shortcake entirely, traveling on a trajectory that would take it to the next town if something didn't get in the way. Something did. Cringing, and with a great feeling of dread, I slowly turned my head to the left and saw that...

...I had scored a direct hit on my brother's face. With an open-mouth look of great astonishment, he was wiping whipped cream out of his eyes with his index finger, wondering what in the world had happened. That expression on his face is burned into my memory for all time. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), the rest of the evening fades into the background noise of lost memories. I did ask my mom about it not too long ago, but she had great difficulty keeping a straight face as she recalled that evening...

Hm... I think I'd better stop this journey down memory lane, before I incriminate myself any further, so here's where we turn things back to you, our readers. We look forward to your letters of comment. Meanwhile, I can't promise that I'll talk very much about myself in the future, but if you write us, I do make you this guarantee:

You talk, and I'll listen. ☀

Afterword:

It took decades for payback but as they say, what goes around comes around. Several years ago at one of our family reunions my brother recreated the events of that evening, but with *me* on the receiving end of the whipped cream. Just my luck pressurized cans of that stuff never went out of fashion.

Anyway, speaking of luck, this next essay describes a new theory of mine!

The Law of Conservation of Karma and Other Conspiracy Theories

You know, until about a decade ago, I never used to be a believer in conspiracy theories. I'd always thought that the Warren Commission was right all along with the 'single bullet' theory, and that the Boston Red Sox lost game six of the 1986 World Series because of the unpredictable bounce of a baseball. No longer! There have been way too many unlikely things that have happened to me since then. Too many, I'm beginning to think, for mere coincidence to explain.

Let me give you a few examples. Many times, here in the traffic-rich D.C. area I've been caught in traffic tie-ups caused by accidents, but they always seem to occur in the lane *I* happen to be in. And I've lost track of the times I've had to endure a lengthy wait at a street corner waiting for traffic to clear, where if I'd arrived at that corner just ten seconds earlier the intersection would have been clear. And there's more. Supermarket checkout lines I'm in are *always* the slowest; I never seem to have a dollar bill crisp enough to work in a coin changer; the Metrorail train that arrives at the station first is always the one going the wrong direction. It goes on and on and on.

Oh sure, I can imagine you saying, all this is minor stuff, hardly worth mentioning. But there have also been some larger events that have followed this pattern. Two of them happened back in 1992. One was at the Hugo Awards ceremony at the 1992 Worldcon (the topic of a different essay); the other happened a couple of months earlier, the only time I've attended a high school reunion (which turned out to be an alumni dinner for all graduates – it was a *small* school!). It was a long way to travel, way up to a small village in the northern frontier of New York State, but I wanted to go because it had

been 25 years since my high school graduation and I felt almost compelled to find out what had happened to the other 16 people in my graduating class. One of the few advantages in attending a school that small is that you get to know everyone of your classmates pretty well, and I'd thought if any of them would go to an alumni event, it would be on some special anniversary like the 25th.

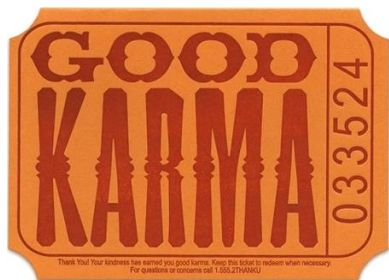
Well, it didn't turn out anywhere near what I'd expected. I did meet several people I knew from other graduating classes, and also a few teachers (including even my Kindergarten teacher), but there was only one other person from my graduating class present that evening. I'd wanted to give him one of my business cards, but there wasn't any way he was going to look at it. Only a few years after graduation, he'd had surgery to remove a brain tumor – and was now blind.

I only bring this up to support my growing belief that there *must* be some cosmic consciousness out there that seems to enjoy playing tricks on me. The most recent evidence was this weekend, in fact. Last night I finally got around to replacing the kitchen faucet, which was becoming balky and starting to leak. The new unit is really nice but it took an amazingly long



where I went to high school

time to get the job done – mostly working to extract the old faucet from the sink. All the connectors for the old faucet were located in places where only someone the size of a hobbit could get to, and the thing was fighting me every step of the way. One of the water supply line valves was stuck, and when I did manage to get it closed off, it started to leak. And when the new unit was finally in place, it turned out that the rubber gasket in one of the water supply lines had broken; I couldn't get a new one because the home supply store had closed ten minutes earlier. Just about everything that could have possibly gone wrong, did. The faucet replacement was finally completed and the leak got fixed this morning, but I'm still checking every hour in the morbid expectation the leak will return.



But every once in a while, this vast cosmic conspiracy shows you that it can be benevolent as well as mischievous. Nicki and I were at Borders today, and even though we had a coupon for 25% off one book, it turned out that we didn't find anything we wanted. So we gave the coupon to the next person in the checkout line, who was a bit surprised at this unexpected good fortune.

A bit less than an hour later we were in Sears, getting ready to spend one of the gift cards we'd received for Christmas, and as I was heading for the checkout line there, a guy walked up to me and gave me a five-dollar Sears coupon he'd just received for having some work done on his car. It was good only for today and he wasn't planning to buy anything else, and I happened to be the first Sears shopper he saw. The funny thing is, when we were in Borders and I gave the discount coupon to the next person in line, I saw that the book he was buying was a thick trade paperback, the kind that sells for about \$20. And 25% off that is... five dollars.

I guess there must be some kind of Law of Conservation of Karma as part of this great cosmic conspiracy. Or, geez, maybe something even *larger* is in play. All I know is, the next time I'm in Borders I'm going to see if I can find some books by Charles Fort. ☼

Afterword:

The kitchen faucet leak did not return, but there was still some leftover bad karma from the repair. A few years later the entire kitchen was torn apart during a floor-to-ceiling remodeling and the faucet was hauled away in the scrap before I thought to save it. The new faucet is identical to the one that was lost in the remodel. But this time a plumber did the installation!

I mentioned earlier that my job at DOE has taken me to many places. Back in the bad old days before wifi and cheap notebook computers, whenever I went on an extended journey I usually wrote a series of postcards to keep in touch with Nicki, and afterwards the individual cards were collected into a 'Postcard Diary'. During a five year span starting in the late 1990s, I wrote Postcard Diaries for every lengthy business trip I took. Except for one.

Notes on a Postcard Diary Not Written

A big event for me recently was a two week business trip with a delegation of four visiting energy experts from Slovakia. This was their annual trip to the United States to see first-hand some technologies that might be useful in their country and to meet some U.S.-based private power developers who are looking for investment opportunities, perhaps in Slovakia.

It's my program, so I spent quite a bit of time setting up the schedule for their visit. When they were here last year, we worked our way west from Washington (by rented passenger van), eventually winding up in Chicago. The outcome from that visit was that we found a developer who was a 'player' for the kinds of smaller investment



with the Slovak energy experts

opportunities that abound in Slovakia. This year I decided to try something different, and we started out west, in San Francisco, then on to Los Angeles, and then San Diego before flying back east to New York City and finally Washington.

It was long, it was a bit intense at times, it was fun much of the time. I decided *not* to write another Postcard Diary about the two weeks, though, partly because I knew I wouldn't have all that much time to myself during the trip. But yet, I could have. Certainly there were plenty of things that happened which would easily have translated into a daily mini-essay.

For instance, on Wednesday, September 23rd, the very first day of the trip while I was standing in the International Arrivals area of the San Francisco airport waiting for the four Slovak visitors to clear customs, it was interesting to watch all the dozens of joyful reunions taking place as travelers emerged and were greeted by family or acquaintances. There was an old Asian man coming in from the flight from Taiwan, being greeted by his daughter and son-in-law, and being introduced to a granddaughter, evidently for the first time. I saw him when he came through the door from customs into the greeting area and watched his face change from expectancy as he looked for his daughter, then recognition as he spotted them waving at him (they were standing right next to me) and then elation as they rushed over to greet him. All those reunions, all the stories that probably could be told about them – you could probably write a dozens of novels about the stories behind all those reunions taking place in the half hour I waited there. I know I could have found a few dozen words to fill a postcard with about it all.

If I had written a postcard about the next day, Thursday the 24th, it would probably have been about the Slovaks' first experience with San Francisco cable cars. We'd decided on dinner at one of my favorite San Francisco restaurants, Des Alpes, and took the cable car to get there. They got the full experience – there weren't enough seats left, so we all stood on the running

boards, each grabbed a pole, and hung out over the side of the cable car all the way up and over Nob Hill. On the way up the steepest section, I took a head count to make sure everyone was still there and I saw four expressions of amazed exhilaration, as if it all wasn't quite real. That picture was worth more than a thousand words, and it would have been difficult to condense it down to just to what would fit on a postcard.

And the next day, Friday the 25th, after a meeting in Marin County, I took them to see the Pacific Ocean. That certainly would have been worth a postcard, except that we never quite got there. The day was rainy and I by the time the meeting was over there really wasn't enough time to go all the way out to Point Reyes. So instead, we went as far as Olema and walked along the Earthquake Trail – the epicenter of the 1906 earthquake that nearly destroyed San Francisco. There's one place along the trail where a wooden fence has been preserved, and there's a six-meter sideways discontinuity in the fence at the point where the San Andreas fault slipped. Four of us stood, arms outstretched, fingertips touching – our combined double arm-widths was just about enough to bridge the gap in the fence. The energy released by that quake was enormous – enough to power the city of San Francisco for decades. You don't always have to look all over the world to find a powerful source of energy – sometimes it's right beneath your feet.



the fence with the six-meter discontinuity

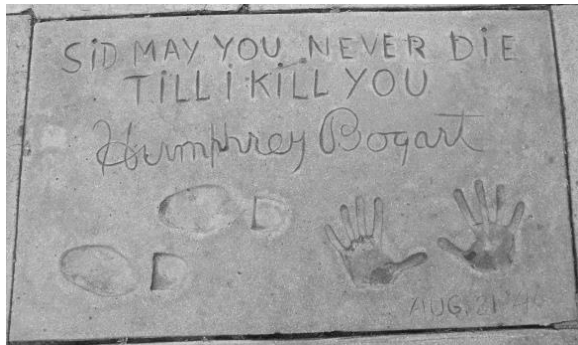
We actually did see the ocean that day, from the Pacific Coast Highway at Stinson Beach. The next day, Saturday the 26th, was our last day in San Francisco so it was time to see the Bay – and even what was *under* it. We were tempted to take a Bay cruise, but in the end we went to Underwater World, a mini-Sea World wanna-be out on Pier 41 at Fisherman's Wharf. The postcard-of-the-day attraction there would have been a plexiglass tunnel with moving walkway that let you see their aquarium from an underwater perspective. There were fishes of all sorts on either side and even above you, including some fairly large sharks that would match speeds with the moving walkway and cruise along next to you, less than a half-meter away on the other side of the clear tunnel. It made me wonder how they considered me – a source of curiosity? Or maybe I just looked like a tasty lunch.



windmills at Altamont Pass

Sunday the 27th was a travel day, and by day's end (and several hundred kilometers of Interstate 5) we were in Los Angeles. Sights of the day included an extensive commercial 'wind farm' of thousands of electricity-generating windmills at Altamont Pass, and mile after mile of endless commercial agriculture along the I-5. If I were doing a postcard diary of the trip, though, the postcard-of-the-day would have been about the area around the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, where we spent the night. It's located right in the business heart of the city, amid all the tall towers. But when the business week is over, the area becomes very foreboding – all the commuters are gone and the only people left are the derelicts. That evening we took a walk around the area (Pershing

Square) trying to find a less expensive place to eat than the hotel restaurant, and it was the only time during the trip when I didn't feel completely safe. But it wasn't just because of all the suspicious-looking people hanging around (some of whom kept coming up to us trying to engage us in conversation). We saw a rustling in the undergrowth along the sidewalk at one point, and we investigated, expecting to maybe find some ground squirrels. Instead, it was a pack of rats that didn't seem particularly afraid of us. After that, we decided it was time to end our restaurant search and head back to the hotel; taking everything into account, the hotel restaurant wasn't so outrageously priced after all!



at Mann's Chinese Theater – Bogie was here!

The meeting the next day Monday the 28th, was on the 54th floor of the tallest building in Los Angeles – it was a clear morning and we could easily see all the way to the Pacific Ocean. But if I had written a postcard about the day, it wouldn't have been about that. Instead, I think I would have examined some cultural differences between America and Eastern Europe. Our business meeting ended early enough that we had a couple of hours to see a bit of the city, so I drove us to Hollywood. When we got to Mann's Chinese Theater and I pointed out the hand prints of

Humphrey Bogart and John Wayne, all I got were blank looks. At first I was amazed – I couldn't imagine *anyone* not knowing who Bogie or The Duke were. But it was just another case of cross-cultural differences – it's too easy to forget that it's been less than ten years since the Iron Curtain came down; before that, movies such *Casablanca* and *Rio Bravo* were deliberately kept out. (Either that, or they just hadn't played very well in Bratislava.)

And if I'd written a postcard about Tuesday, September 29th, our last day in California, I would have described seeing San Diego the way it was intended to be seen – from about a half-kilometer offshore during an evening harbor cruise. We'd gotten to San Diego very late the previous evening and had two intensive business meetings earlier that day. So when our hosts for the second meeting gave us a choice of touring their turbine assembly plant or an evening on their boat, it was an easy decision to make. We even saw a movie star during the cruise – not a person, but a building (the Hotel Del Coronado, featured in the films *Some Like It Hot* and *The Stunt Man* is situated on a narrow strip of land that fronts the Pacific Ocean on one side and the Harbor on the other). I've got to find an excuse to come here again someday.

Wednesday, September 30th, was another travel day, this time a transcontinental flight to New York City. If I was doing a Postcard Diary of this trip, I would have been tempted to write something about the officious government rules that caused me to take a different flight than the Slovak delegation. Northwest Airlines is the contracted carrier between San Diego and New York-LaGuardia, but when the time came to make reservations for the trip, the Northwest pilots were still on strike. So we booked the Slovaks on United for the same price.



aboard the boat

Northwest did start flying again a little more than a week before I left for California, but wanting to be on the same flight as my visitors was not enough justification to switch me over to the United flight. Before we separated at the San Diego airport, I gave them a set of default instructions on how to get to the hotel in Manhattan if my flight was more than two hours late (we each had a connection midway), but luckily it didn't come to that. My flights were (thankfully) uneventful, but some of the views were spectacular. If we'd all been on that Northwest flight, I think I would have instead written something about the view of the Grand Canyon from the air. It's the third time I've had that experience, and it doesn't get old. Someday I'm going to get the opportunity to see it from the south rim, and when I do, a postcard won't be nearly enough room to describe it.



Statue of Liberty from Battery Park

October 1st was the next-to-last day of the trip, and if I'd written a postcard about the day, it would have described some of the views our travels for the day had provided us. Our one business meeting of the day was way north of the city, in Kingston, and the train ride to get there (and back) offered some splendid vistas along the Hudson, including one of the U.S. Military Academy on a bluff high above the river at West Point. But there was an even more impressive set of vistas at the 86th floor terrace of the Empire State Building, up where the wind was blowing like a hurricane. And after that, it was a subway ride down to Battery Park, where my visitors got their first view of the Statue of Liberty. The day more than met their expectations, even if the view of Lady Liberty didn't – from that vantage point, she faces in the other direction!

The last day of the road trip was Friday, October 2nd, and it was good to get home. The visit of the Slovak delegation continued for five more days, in Washington, but at least I could sleep in my own bed again. There were a lot of things that might have been worth a postcard for the day – there was the retiree who was making a few extra dollars by working as a limo driver (he was a life saver in knowing short cuts that got us to the airport in time for our flight after our business meeting ran late). There was New York itself – a great city and a human kaleidoscope that, unlike Los Angeles, seems to stay alive at all hours of night and day. And there were all the seemingly unordinary sights we saw along the way all during this trip – everything from sea lions in San Francisco Bay to aircraft carriers in San Diego Harbor. But if I was *really* doing a Postcard Diary of this trip, I would have used today's card to mention the most unlikely sight of all. It happened when the airplane was pulling up to the gate after it had landed at Washington National Airport. Just as the plane was powering down and everyone was scrambling for their carry-ons, I happened to look out the window to where the baggage unloader was approaching and saw a familiar-looking guy standing out there next to the baggage carts. It took two seconds and one double-take to recognize who it was – the hair and the sneer were a dead giveaway.

It was Elvis. ☀

Afterword:

I've been very fortunate that my journeys have allowed me to see and experience many parts of the world. But they have also allowed me to meet many interesting people, especially when I made a concerted effort to do so!

Other Places, Other Fandoms

Friday, December 10, 1999 (Bratislava, Slovakia)

At last, an easy day in this trip. The one wrap-up meeting was scheduled late enough in the day that there was time for a drive out to the city of Piešťany and back. The main attractions of Piešťany are its spa and thermal springs, and much of the economy there seems to depend on them. I tried some of the supposedly curative mineral water, but it was so sulfurous that it tasted like eggs had been boiled in it. I guess I'm thankful there wasn't enough time to indulge in the supposedly equally curative mud baths – the stuff is mildly radioactive and I'm not ready to spend the rest of my life acting as my own night light!

####

Those of you who have read some of my Postcard Diaries know that my real-world job, as an international trade promotion specialist, usually takes me to Eastern Europe once or twice each year. Even though my hosts over there do take every opportunity to allow me to experience their countries, these trips are intense – there's often not time to do much after a long day of business meetings except write a few postcards to friends and collapse into bed.

It eventually dawned on me, with some insistent nudging from my friend Guy Lillian, that I was really missing out on something by not trying harder to find and meet some of the science fiction fans who live in the places that I visit. Even though I do know some fans in parts of Poland, Guy was mostly right; in all my many trips to Bratislava, for instance, I'd done nothing whatsoever to try to locate the local fan club there, much less try to attend one of their meetings.

So when the time came to prepare for my trip to Slovakia and Poland this past December, I decided that this time it would be different. I'd met and enjoyed the company of fans from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Japan during Aussiecon in 1999; this trip to Eastern Europe would finally be the time I'd get to meet some of those fandoms, too.

To my surprise, it turned out easier to do than I thought it would. The day before I left home, I was able to get the email address of Martina Pilcerová, a member of the Bratislava fan club. I didn't receive a response from my query to her about meeting dates and places before I arrived in Bratislava, but luckily there was an Internet café not far from where I was staying, and by the time I was able to access my email one evening, the response was there waiting – it turned out the meeting was going on that same evening in a bar/restaurant just a five minute walk!



Bratislava fans

It was a very pleasant meeting. I'd only intended to stay about a half-hour, but the conversation was excellent (as were several large glasses of Slovak beer) and we ended up closing the place around midnight. I was surprised that many of them had fairly specific knowledge of North American fandom, though not of many individual fans themselves. And I was even more surprised to find out that in spite of the disadvantageous exchange rate between

the Slovak koruna and the U.S. dollar, some of them had previously been to the United States. Martina had even attended two previous North American Worldcons, and was planning ahead for Chicago! By the time the evening had expired, so had most of my preconceptions.

One other thing I should mention about Bratislava fandom is that they are very committed fan publishers! They have a very slick-looking Slovak-language magazine, *Fantazia*, edited by Ivan Aleksa, that seems a combination of *Locus*, *Starlog*, and *F&SF*... and maybe even a little bit of *Mimosa* as well. There were manuscripts of some of the articles they were considering for their next issue spread out on the restaurant table when I arrived for their next meeting two nights later. It was easy to see they were having a good time being trailbreakers; *Fantazia* is presently the world's only Slovak-language science fiction periodical.

Poland is a much larger country than Slovakia in terms of population, so you'd expect there'd be more fans and fan organizations there, too. And there are. There are so many, in fact, that even if I'd had several weeks there, I might not get to meet with all of them. My December trip took me to Poland for only four days, so I really had time for only two meetings, one in Warsaw and one in the southern Polish city of Katowice.

I'd previously met some of the Katowice fans. One of them, now the Director of a large design engineering institute, had been part of a delegation of Polish Energy experts I hosted in 1990. And we didn't discover that each of us was a science fiction fan until a chance remark in a breakfast restaurant in Owensboro, Kentucky, after more than a week had passed! (But that's another story.)



Katowice fans

The Katowice club also publishes fanzines (including an English-language one!), and is a bit eclectic; their interests seem to include everything from Tolkien fandom to "Let's party!" And it's also one of the more well-known and visible fan groups in Poland; they have their own clubhouse (something that only a few SF clubs in the United States can boast) and one of their members (Piotr Cholewa) is the leading translator of Polish science fiction.

Warsaw is by far the largest city in Poland, and it also has the largest fan community in the country. I was told by one of my fan friends in Warsaw that there are several different fan clubs in the city. Unfortunately, I didn't have much of a chance to talk to very many of them the one night I thought I'd be free; that's one of the perils of a business trip. But they were a cheerful group, and insisted I stay at least to drink a beer with them; it was an offer I couldn't refuse.

When the time comes to go Eastern Europe again, I don't think I'll need any more reminders to locate other fans. It's an enriching experience that I can recommend for anyone. I know it was for me. ☀

Afterword:

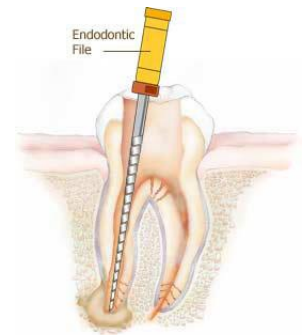
There's room for one more journey before I close this collection. But this one, from back in 2005, was for a purpose I was absolutely not looking forward to!

My Plans for Screenwriting Stardom

I have an idea for a new Quentin Tarantino movie.

It's similar to one of his previous films, *Reservoir Dogs*. There's a segment in that film where a cop is confined to a chair and tormented quite graphically by his captors. But that all takes place in a nondescript chair in an empty warehouse. My idea is that scene would work much better in a dentist's office where there would be all kinds of horrible sounds and goriness to thrill the audience.

You could film it from the tormented person's perspective – the person's mouth is propped open and there is a loud high-speed grinding sound as a hole is drilled into the center of one of the bicuspids. The dentist then switches to a lower-speed drill, but uses a rotating rasp to abrade out the pulp of the tooth. Small bits of gore splash out every so often to the sound of grinding. And then it gets better yet – the dentist takes a series of long conical files, each one ending in a lethal-looking point, and jams them down into the tooth as far as they will go, yanking them out with bits of the pulp that the grinder missed. This goes on and on, using smaller and smaller conical files with the last one looking like a sharp needle. Every so often one gets stuck and the dentist has to use a bit of force to get it back out.



I'm now making a point to floss more often!

But it gets better yet! At the end, the dentist uses an instrument shaped somewhat like a soldering gun to insert a wire into the tooth, pulls the switch and the wire heats to red-hot in a matter of seconds. There is a sound of scorching (and a smell also, though the audience would have to use its imagination for that). Finally the dentist jams some organic-looking rubbery material into the tooth and inserts a cap to keep it in place. All through the scene we cut to shots of the guy in the chair, hands

white-knuckled grabbing the armrests and sweat beading on his forehead.

If it's done right, this might be a big draw for the teen-scream movie crowd. And I even have a name for the film: *Root Canal*. I wonder if Quentin would be interested...

(Thank goodness for modern-day local anesthetics!) ☀

