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“It’s Always About the Language”

On a recent visit to the coffee shop, my wife described something – I don’t even recall what - to me, saying “. . .it runs the full gamut. . .” As a dues paying member of the grammar school police athletic league, I corrected her – the gamut *is* the full – the complete - something. She is quite used to this by now, having me say things that only show that I’m paying attention in a vaguely insulting way – and didn’t throw her whole milk latte at me, perhaps because it was an excellent latte, and not worth wasting on me. Literally, (as the ubiquitous they too frequently say.) Told me I was wrong, and gave me a patent-pending shut-up look.

I did shut up. And, because that’s the kind of hair-pin I am, when I got home I looked up the definition of gamut (don’t judge me).

And found it described as being the complete range or scope of something, as in – and this was their example – “*the whole gamut of human emotion.*”

Hold on a minute there, pard. If gamut means complete, then why say the “whole complete?” Or, rather, what I should be saying is this is wrong. Bad grammar, right?

But I’ve always heard the phrase as “running the full/whole gamut.” Can it be bad grammar if it’s what we’ve always said? Is there a . . . a statute of limitations . . . on mistakes in jargon or idiomatic phrases that eventually permits them to be led over to the light side of the Force?

Of course there is. The Milton I read at gunpoint forty years ago is full of antiquated English (even for forty years ago) and annoying syntactical constructions that we don’t use anymore. Thank God for that. Time’s inexorable passage, and the Atlantic Ocean, often divide our language between and betwixt.

So what are the rules? How long do we have to muddle through before we can pitch certain turns of phrase into the trash bin of time? Is it a Somerset Maugham sort of thing, that there’s a rule, but no one knows what it is? And are we spending too much precious time thinking about it?

I saw a social media post in which someone asked if readers prefer good grammar in a workmanlike story to spelling/punctuation hiccups in an excellent yarn. Not that they worded their question in this fashion, but

this was the general gist of their post. (Which, of course, is one of those pizza pie tautological idioms in that “gist” already means “central idea” which implies generality, anyhow. For crying out loud. It’s a wonder we get anything across to one another at all.)

Anyway, I vacillated between wanting good grammar – that is, well edited prose – and a rattling good story.

Why? Well, because I think, (therefore, I deserve heaps of righteous emotional scorn) we ought to rely on good copyeditors to fix faulty grammar and punctuation, or, as an excellent friend calls it, the myriad jots and tittles in a story’s layout. But...who’s going to make a story a better story? Another writer? Maybe, but probably not. There are definitely rules for that, in the section referencing copyright.

We could fill a book, and mightily boring it would be, with social media’s coffee-table discussion about grammar and language and idiom, and the mistakes we keep making, as speaking and writing humans. And most of that would be plagiarism of a sort; tidbits we’ve picked up from hyped-up memes and other folks’ stale jokes. Autocorrect. Possession v plural. Word choice boners. Typographical miscues.

We’re beating a dead horse. Belaboring the obvious. Other stale chestnuts.

At least, I think so. Perhaps others consider this a conversational tool, a way to find common ground, by agreeing to others’ faults. Perhaps not.

What happens when we read? What is the deal between us? I imagine we enter the compact of author/reader under the assumption that we are equals – two people attempting to make something of the words on the page? Or is the author a higher authority? No pun intended.

Furthermore, what is the relationship between author and editor? Is there a secret handshake there as well? Creator and pre-critic, scribbler and proofreader. Submitter and decision-maker. Shots are fired across the bows. Second spaces after periods, to em-dash or not to em-dash, how many dots in an ellipse, and what the hell is the point of a prologue, anyway? These minutiae of language litter certain online battlefields where word people go to find someone who understands, they hope, their Eliotesque wasteland angst.

As for me, I’m on the fence. I like diving into a story as much as anyone, but hiccup when there are no quotes around dialogue. On another hand, I could care less about one or two spaces after a period. I mean

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

and for the coupe-de-grass, we're

“Abundant Life”

by Mark Smith

Francie stops abruptly. She had been talking about some post on Instagram that pissed her off beyond belief when the apparition of the building that she and her boyfriend Blake are walking beside freezes her in her tracks.

“Wait. What the hell is this place?”

Blake walks a few paces beyond her before he stops and looks up. He had been lost in thought, half listening to Francie’s diatribe about the post, but also thinking about something that happened at his job yesterday, Friday, and also trying to push it from his mind, telling himself he didn’t have to think about that until Monday.

Neither of them had been paying attention to the building they are walking by. They didn’t venture into this part of Tulsa often, but they had heard about an interesting coffee shop nearby so they drove over, parked, and were now walking around exploring the neighborhood. This was all part of Francie’s plan to inject a little life into their relationship, which she thought had become a bit tired of late. Six years of living together will do that. Both had rebounded from brief and childless first marriages and by unspoken agreement they had decided to keep it simple. But now Francie was determined to push things to a more interesting and

revitalized plane, one weekend adventure at a time. Two weeks ago the Dylan Center and Greenwood, last week the Philbrook Art Museum, today this part of downtown near the river they don’t know well.

Now this building has brought them back to the present and they are standing on a weedy and cracked sidewalk outside a chain-link fence contemplating the structure before them. It is a massive monolith, rising at least seven or eight stories. The lower portion of the building is wider than the top, giving the upper half of the building the impression that it is a smaller box sitting on top of a larger, slightly flatter box. It looks at first glance like perhaps it is an old shopping mall, uniformly white, but the upper part covered with a design of diamond shaped patterns, some of which are gold in color. But what is remarkable about the building, aside from its decaying exterior, is that there are absolutely no windows, none on any side. There is what appears to be a front entrance under a modernist overhang, but the doors have been blocked off. Francie and Blake back up to look up the side of the building to where a row of gold diamonds stand protruding above the roof line—many broken, some missing—that suggest something like the

top of a crenelated castle wall. Though it is clear that the building has obviously been long abandoned, it nevertheless evokes a glorious past life when its alabaster facade and golden diamonds glowed with an audacious prosperity.

“Jesus,” says Blake. “What the hell?”

“Wow,” says Francie. “What do you think it was? Is? Looks like it must have been pretty impressive back in the day.”

“No windows at all. Maybe it was a Masonic Hall.”

“Maybe. But it seems too modern for that. Maybe a shopping mall?”

“Brutalist. Mid-century,” says Blake, who knows a little about architecture.

“That architecture history class of yours is coming in handy again,” Francie grins. “So, Mr. Expert, where are the doors?” Blake shakes his head. She’s right: no doors. Only the abandoned front entry that seems now to have been bricked and boarded up.

“Huh. You’re right,” says Blake. “Hey, let’s check around the back.” Francie nods and they make their way along the fence surrounding the property. As Blake studies the broken sidewalk and the weeds that have grown to impressive heights, Francie takes out her phone and

starts to search. Blake notices and knows what she is up to. Francie, who always hated computers, has become an avid Internet sleuth. Someone on social media once complimented her “Google-fu” and she loved that. Regardless of the topic, she loves nothing more than whipping out her phone to find information at the drop of a hat. Someone might say, “Did you ever wonder why—” and almost before they can finish the question, Francie will have found the answer. Blake liked to tease her saying she was like a Jeopardy contestant hitting the bell. Sometimes it annoyed him; after all, shouldn’t there be some mysteries in life? But now he welcomes it because he has also become very curious about this weird building.

“What does it say?”

Francie holds out her phone to show Blake, who leans forward to see. He’s looking at a photo of the building in all its faded glory.

“How did you do that?”

“I Googled ‘windowless building downtown Tulsa’ and it popped up.”

“Amazing. You really do have Google-fu.”

Francie grins. “You handle the architectural styles and leave the research to the pros.” She reads, “The Abundant Life Building.” She looks up and squints. “Really?”

“Keep reading.”

“One of the most unusual and fascinating buildings in Tulsa is a huge, windowless, seven-story concrete block sitting empty in south downtown.’ yada yada,” says

Francie, skipping down. “Designed in 1958...midcentury trend toward modernist, futuristic architecture.”

“Boo-yah!” Blake pumps his fist. “Wha’d I say?”

“Yep, you called it, professor.” Blake usually hates it when she calls him professor. After all, he’s not. He just teaches a couple of English comp classes in night school at the community college as a side-hustle. But today he’s in a good mood.

Francie continues reading. “Built as the world headquarters for the Oral Roberts Ministries’ blah blah ‘a gigantic televangelist enterprise reaching millions of followers around the globe.’”

Francie lowers her phone and looks up. “Son of a bitch,” she marvels.

“Wow! Oral Roberts? For real? So this is where it all started.”

Francie tilts her head slightly. “You sound genuinely awed.”

“Well, kind of. I mean, my grandparents loved him. I remember watching him on TV when I would go visit them when I was a kid. He was charismatic as hell. Mesmerizing. He had this way of talking that you just couldn’t look away.”

“Yeah, I guess. Your grandparents probably sent all their hard-earned money right here to the, what was it?”

“The Abundant Life Building?” said Blake.

“Uh huh. Abundant Life. Your family was a bunch of crackers. You know that, right?”

“Oh yeah, you married down,

Miss hoity-toity New Englander.”

“Shut up, dickwad. I prefer the term Masshole.”

Blake laughs. He loves to get her irritated with him, which happens pretty much every few minutes. “Come on, let’s see what the back side of the place looks like.” They continue to follow the chain-link fence around the perimeter of the property. The rear of the building looks much the same as the front though perhaps even more desolate being that behind the building is a rutted and ruined parking lot. Blake stops and says, “That’s odd.”

“What’s odd?” says Francie.

“That door.” Blake motions toward a door they had not noticed at first.

“What’s odd about it?”

“Okay, does that look like a door that goes with this building?”

Francie looks again and sees what he means. It is just a flimsy wooden door, like a closet door from the interior of a very ordinary house, complete with a brass-colored doorknob with a twist lock. “I see what you mean. Not very Mid-Century Futurist.”

“No more like Late-Century Habitat ReStore if you ask me.”

Just then a car rolls by, a dingy, at-least-decade-old, once-white Ford Taurus with scratches and dents all over and a cracked rear taillight. The car turns at the corner of the building a few feet away. Francie and Blake look at each other, shrug, and follow the car. They watch as the car pulls up to what appears to be a night

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deposit box, the only part of the building that is not behind the fence. The driver of the car, a woman, maybe in her late forties or fifties, takes an envelope from a dispenser then, a moment later, reaches out to pull the handle of the drop box, and slides the now fatter and sealed envelope into the slot. Her transaction complete, she drives away.

“How do you like that?”

“Strange things are afoot at the Abundant Life Building,” says Blake. He waits for a moment, but Francie doesn’t respond. “You never get my cultural references.”

Francie rolls her eyes. At that moment, the cheap ReStore door opens and a man steps out. He doesn’t notice Francie and Blake at first, giving them a moment to look more closely at him. He is a smallish man of about 60 or older, thin greying hair and well groomed in dress slacks and shirt, suspenders, and dress shoes. The man seems intent on a task, but then looks up to see Francie and Blake and stops abruptly.

“Who are you?” he says.

“Uh, hi,” says Francie. “We were just walking by and—”

“This is private property,” says the man, his eyes narrowing looking from Francie to Blake and back to Francie.

“Oh, yeah, totally. We understand. We just thought it was such a cool building.”

“Yeah,” adds Blake, “we were just curious about the building. The Abundant Life Building, right?”

The man hesitates, sizing them

up. Finally he must decide they are harmless. He says, “Yes, that’s right. Conceived and built in 1958 by the great Oral Roberts. I had the privilege to serve Reverend Roberts until he went to live with the savior.”

“Oh yes,” says Blake. “He was amazing. My grandparents were big fans.”

Francie stares at Blake. He shoots her a look. She refrains from making a comment.

“He was indeed. And his good work lives on. Many people still honor him with their contributions.”

Francie and Blake exchange glances and Francie moves to walk away when Blake blurts out, “Do you think we could see inside the building?”

Francie’s eyes widen. The man’s eyes narrow. He says, “Only myself and a couple of others are authorized to enter.”

“Okay, then,” says Francie. “That’s too bad. I guess we’d better get going.”

“But,” says the man. “Since you are admirers of Reverend Roberts’ ministry, well, I can’t see the harm.”

Francie starts, “Well, I wouldn’t say—” but the man continues to talk. “It is a rather impressive building, though I warn you the interior needs a little maintenance.” With that he turns and heads toward the back door, motioning them to follow.

“Are you crazy?” she whispers fiercely.

“What?” says Blake. “Aren’t you

curious?”

“I do not want to go in there!”

“Why not? What else are we doing?”

The man waits, holding the ReStore door open for them. Francie looks at Blake, hesitates, then rolls her eyes and shrugs, “Oh what the hell.”

Blake grins and bolts toward the open door, Francie following. Francie and Blake fall in behind the man as he steps out of the bright sunlight and into the dark interior of the Abundant Life Building. As their eyes adjust to the darkness, the man moves a few feet ahead of them.

Francie whispers to Blake, “Jeez, look at this place. It’s a mess!” Blake nods as they enter a hallway that looks like a bomb went off years ago. The floor is bare concrete littered with fallen acoustic ceiling tiles. Piles of pink insulation are pushed up against the walls just enough to allow a narrow walking path. The overhead lights are out, the fixtures coated in rust. A musty smell suggesting rampant mold hangs in the air and a layer of dust lies over every object and surface. As they follow the man down the hallway, they turn a corner to find more of the same kind of wreckage. Francie peers through doors into offices where abandoned furniture is piled haphazardly in corners. Wires and cables lie on the damp and threadbare carpets or hang from the ceilings. Without windows the only light is a reddish glow from the exit signs, the hallway and rooms were dark.

The man walks several paces ahead and Blake and Francie exchange glances. Francie pauses before two once-grand elevator doors clad in tarnished bronze with diamond shaped patterns recessed in a wall of rose-colored marble that carried on the same diamond pattern, but the displays over the elevator doors are missing, revealing the fluorescent tube in the fixture. The concrete floor is covered with dirt and a green soda bottle, dusty and long empty, lies on its side.

“The elevator doesn’t work anymore,” says the man. Francie stifles a giggle. “We’ll take the stairs.” The man turns at a stairwell door and leads them up a dark narrow set of concrete steps. The light is so dim that Francie has to take out her phone and turn on the flashlight, throwing the dirt and dust covering the floor and the filthy, crumbling drywall into sharp relief.

“Where are you taking us?” Francie says, a slight panic rising in her voice.

“We are almost there,” says the man.

At the top of the stairs, they step through into a large open room that looks as though it might have been a ballroom or auditorium. Chairs that may once have been set in rows are now cast randomly around the room, some tipped over on their sides, others pushed against the walls. The floor is carpeted in a geometric pattern in shades of faded gold and silver. But inexplicably this room is brightly lit from modernist chandeliers

that hang in rows down the center of the room.

The man who has led them here and who, until now, has said almost nothing, turns to them and says, “We had such good times here back in the day.” The man looks around wistfully. “Reverend Roberts led his ministry to great heights and it all started here. I was with him from the beginning.”

“My grandparents watched him every week,” says Blake.

“Oh yes,” says the man. “I’m sure they gave generously and if they did, their checks came here and more than likely I processed their donations. That was my job. Still is. People still send in payments or even drop them in the slot outside. We’ll never close the Abundant Life Building as long as the faithful continue to express their love of the Lord and Reverend Roberts’ ministries.”

Francie looks up from her phone. “He died in 2009.”

“Yes, Reverend Roberts left this world to be with the Savior while he was living in California. His mortal body is buried here in Tulsa.”

Francie looks around at the once-grand room. “What is this place?”

The man laughs. “Ah. Many wonderful times in this room, I can tell you. Fundraisers, social gatherings, prayer meetings, sermons, even visiting heads of state and celebrities stopped by from time to time. Reverend Roberts knew how to impress and how to persuade. And he had an impeccable sense of design. Far ahead of his time. Have

you visited the university? The Prayer Tower alone is a divine inspiration.”

“I have,” says Blake. “It’s amazing.”

“Wait. What?” says Francie. “Are you like a closet Baptist or something?”

Blake laughs. “My grandma took me there when I was a teenager. She wanted me to go to college there. I didn’t of course, but the campus is cool and that tower is amazing.”

“Do I even know you?” says Francie.

“It will inspire anyone to accept Jesus,” says the man, his eyes drifting toward heaven. Blake looks up, too.

“Okay,” Francie says. “I’m about ready to get out of here. This place is starting to freak me out.” But almost before she finishes speaking, something changes. At first, it is almost imperceptible, a slight increase in light that slowly grows brighter.

“Oh my,” says the man, looking around. “You folks are in for a treat. This doesn’t happen often.”

“What—?” Francie starts to say, but the lights grow so bright that all three have to cover their eyes. As they do, a hum that might have been there all along starts to grow louder until abruptly it stops. As if on cue, they all lower their hands from their faces. Standing before them is a man in a 1950s style suit, beautifully tailored, striped tie and leather loafers. His hair is short and very dark and shiny. His eyes are glowing and he is smiling at them



with a peaceful easy grin that puts them all at ease at once.

“Well who do we have here, Mr. Winston?”

The voice comes to them not like a regular voice, but like a transmission from outer space filtered over the fathomless dark void and through relay towers spanning silent deserts and intercepted by tubes glowing in radios and televisions to ears eagerly waiting in homes across the heartland.

Francie might recognize the voice, but Blake has no doubt. He knows it like he would know his own mother or father’s voices, in just those few words, the reassuring calmness, the complete lack of an Oklahoma twang or any regional accent, just pure round words like perfect ripe fruit hanging on sunlit branches.

All three stare in wonder at the apparition that vibrates before them, real in every aspect, but surely, Francie thinks, still holding her phone open to Wikipedia, a trick of technology, a hologram or other illusion, for no way can it be—

“Reverend Roberts,” Mr. Winston says. His voice is full of wonder, but he is not surprised. Whatever is happening, Winston has seen it before.

“These two young people were looking around outside. They were curious about the building. I let them come in for a brief tour. My sincerest apologies.”

“Oh no, no, no,” says Oral Roberts. “We always welcome visitors to the Abundant Life Building. Isn’t it grand? A true testament to

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. A monument befitting his everlasting gift to us. And one of my proudest accomplishments.”

His voice covers Francie and Blake like a soothing blanket, soft like satin and warming though with just a hint of coolness in the perfect sheen. His smile is saintly and utterly relaxed. If he knows he is dead, he doesn’t seem to mind.

Francie thinks to say that it appears that there have been no visitors to the place in decades, but before she can summon the words, Blake says, “Is it really you?”

Oral Roberts chuckles good naturedly. “Oh, yes, son. It’s me. I can well understand your confusion as I have been gone these years. But when you hold on to Jesus’ hand as tightly as I do, well things can happen beyond quotidian understanding. Your scientists think they know how the world works, but they do not know one one-thousandth, no, one-millionth of the true nature of reality.”

Francie looks from Oral Roberts to Blake who is transfixed. She opens her mouth to speak, but no words emerge.

Oral Roberts turns his gaze toward her. “You are a non-believer,” he says simply, his smile never leaving the corners of his mouth. “I can tell.”

Francie says, “I—well, I—no, that’s true. I’m not a believer.”

“Well, young lady, you and I will have much to talk about one day.” Still he smiles but his voice carries a chill like a window has just been opened. “There are many

like you, but America is changing. Another Great Awakening is upon us that will return this nation to what the Founding Fathers envisioned. . . .”

“Amen,” says Winston.

“. . . a Christian nation, a shining city on the hill, created to fulfill God’s will and achieve a final triumph over evil. That’s why I’m back, to help the Lord Jesus lead this great Christian nation to glory and triumph at last over the wicked.”

“Amen,” says Winston again.

“Thank you, Brother Winston. You are a faithful servant.” Winston looks down and nods.

“The wicked?” says Francie.

“Yes, my child, the wicked. The God-haters, the fornicators, the abortionists, the pornographers, the pedophiles, the homosexuals, the miscegenists, the life-deniers, the killers, the heathens, and all others, though they may be guilty of lesser sins, who nonetheless put their own petty selves above God.”

As Oral Roberts speaks, his voice rises, becomes full, round, rich with the heavy righteousness of his words, his eyes turn up toward heaven which he apparently can see beyond the tarnished art deco chandeliers and the dulled bronze chevrons that adorn the ceiling. Francie tears her eyes away from Oral Roberts and looks at Blake. He is smiling. Mr. Winston is smiling, too. Francie is the only one not smiling and at once she has an intense panic to run from this place.

“Blake!” she shouts. “We need

to go!” But Blake does not move or look at her.

Oral Roberts shakes his head. “Why do you want to leave? It’s lovely here.”

Lovely? Francie says, then realizes that no word came out of her mouth. Other words are in her head that she cannot speak. It’s not lovely. It’s a decrepit mess. It’s a dystopian ruin, destroyed and forgotten just like you. What are you anyway? Where are the wires? Where is the projection coming from? Were you ever real? You fooled all those people into sending you money, but you’re not fooling me.

As though he can hear her thoughts, Oral Roberts says, “You can leave any time you wish, but sooner or later you will come to us. Your age of unbelief is ending. Sodom and Gomorrah will burn.” His smile never leaves, but his hair has become a bit unruly and a curl has fallen onto his forehead.

“Blake!” Francie yells. “For God’s sake snap out of it!” But Blake shows no sign of hearing Francie, a look of serene contentment that Francie has never seen before has drifted onto his face and now he looks almost like a little boy, like the years have fallen from him and he is back in his grandma’s house watching Oral Roberts on TV clutching his Bible, sweating through his stylish suit, pushing that strand of hair back from his forehead only to have it fall again.

The lights in the room flicker slightly. All but Oral Roberts look up and around to see what is hap-

pening and they see that the ballroom and everything in it has lost all color and is now the same black and white that Oral Roberts has been all along, the black and white and washed out greys of a 1950s television set. As they look, Oral Roberts has gradually grown even younger. He now IS that preacher in a light-colored suit, still smiling his boyish grin.

“Stay with us, Francie,” he says. “We need your kind in the flock.”

“My kind? And how do you know my name?”

Mr. Winston begins to move toward Francie. She turns to Blake. “I’m leaving, Blake. You coming?” Blake looks toward Francie, but doesn’t seem to see her.

“I like it here,” he says. “It’s easier here. Can’t we stay?”

Francie lets out an exasperated cry then reaches out and takes Blake’s hand. Almost at once she can feel the spell pass out of him like an electrical current. His eyes seem to sharpen. He looks once more toward Oral Roberts who stands glowing and smiling.

“Francie, where are we?”

“Come on, babe. The sermon’s over. We’re leaving.”

Winston steps toward them and they are off, Francie running toward the stairwell, pulling Blake by the hand. He is looking back to where Oral Roberts and Mr. Winston stand. The last thing he hears is Oral Roberts saying, “Thank you for coming. We will see you again soon.” Mr. Winston is scowling at them but makes no move to follow. Oral Roberts con-

tinues to smile with his twinkly-eyed grin that was good for a hundred million dollars, maybe even now someone is pulling up to the night deposit slot to leave what they can afford to help the ministry continue to spread the word of God.

Francie and Blake make their way down the dark stairs, strewn with downed wires and trash, out the door marked with a big numeral 1, down a dark hall then another, stepping around loose floor tiles and warping carpets and fallen ceiling tiles, cables, debris.

Finally they come to the door Francie recognizes as the one they entered. And just like that, they are outside, but Francie keeps running, Blake in tow, until they are a block away. Only then does Francie realize that darkness has fallen while they have been inside. She stops and turns to look back at the Abundant Life Building which is now bathed in beautiful glowing silver and gold light flowing up the monolithic exterior walls, and no longer is the building a dilapidated ruin, but now a resplendent palace vibrating with energy and celestial illumination.

“Wow,” says Blake. “It’s beautiful.”

“Okay, fanboy, that’s enough of that,” says Francie. “Appearances are deceiving. We’re getting the hell out of here.” ❖

“William Jay Smith and Pictures of Peace and War”

by Victor Pogostin

Back in the other life when I freelanced for the USSR Writer's Union I often travelled to Georgia. The Soviets loved taking foreign VIPs to wine and dine in Tbilisi. Wining supposedly smoothed selling the notion that the region prospered knowing no fear beyond the edges of the friendly bayonets as the iconic Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov wrote in the 19th century.

In the Fall of 1978, the Writers Union hired me as an interpreter and a travel companion to William Jay and Sonia Smith in their three weeks tour of the USSR. After Moscow and Tashkent, Georgia was our third stop on the trip.

“Please don't.” Viktor, our driver for the trip, stopped me from buckling my seat belt.

“Why?”

“They won't respect us if you do.”

“Who they?”

“Police.”

“Why?”

“Chiefs do not buckle.”

“Neither the Smiths nor I are chiefs.”

“You are when you are in the chiefs' car.”

“Not even on the mountain roads?”

“Never.”

“Weird perk.” chuckled Bill in the back seat.

He and Sonia refused to play chiefs. They buckled and during the two-hour drive to the town of Tsinori in the Alazani Valley Bill held Sonia's hand. He also did it on all our take-offs and landings. Our white Volga decorated with special government license plates took off after an escorting light flashing traffic police car. A black Volga with Joseph Noneshvili, a poet himself and the Minister of Culture of Georgia, followed. It was Sunday and Joseph Noneshvili suggested we go to Khakheti, Georgia's main wine producing region where his son worked at the archeological excavations in the Alazani Valley.

Late afternoon, after the inevitable lecture in the office of the 1st Secretary of the Regional Communist Party Committee on the advantages of developed Socialism versus the stagnant American economy, we were happy to escape into the fresh mountain air to visit the region's largest wine-growing collective farm.

The Farm's wine cellar built with old rubble stood atop a hillside overlooking a vast colorful patchwork of the Alazani Valley fields

rimmed by the snowy peaks of the mountain range. The crisp fall air felt good, and we gladly accepted the invitation to what we thought would be a quick late lunch. So, I thought.

We were seated at the middle of a rough-hewn plank table that stood on the Valley side of the cellar. The table was preset for at least twenty persons with pieces of still hot “Puri”, the long-pointed bread baked in deep clay ovens and wine in clay jars. The enchanting view was so serene that even our hosts didn't feel like chatting. We sat in silence sipping wine and chewing on bread. Bill was scribbling notes in his diary. Suddenly the sleepy calm of the hill broke with “doli” (drum) rolls, and a party of singing and dancing men appeared from behind the cellar. Wearing traditional “chokras”, wool coats with cartridge holders on the chest, and daggers hanging from their belts, the party danced towards the table and sat on either side of us. A flock of beautiful women in “kartuli”, belted embroidered dresses with long flaps, followed deftly laying the table with tomato and cucumber salads, roasted suckling pig, “khachapuri” (hot cheese filled bread), pickled vegetables, smoked cheese and chicken, skewers with pork, lamb and chicken shish kebobs tossed with raw onions,

grilled trout, and clay dishes with mushrooms with cheese baked in butter. Wine flowed, toasts to Georgia, friends, women, poetry poured breaking only for spontaneous polyphonic singing of men. It was three in the afternoon when the multi-course binge called “Supra” started and we couldn’t even leave the table until it was getting dark. Sonia and Bill tried to skip drinking bottoms up. Yet, Bill and I couldn’t escape the last killer-toast when we were offered filled to the brim “khantsi”, drinking horns often made of goat or ram horns. After toasting with a “*kbantsi*”, you can’t put it down and must drink the entire contents under the singing men’s watch.

The starry night quickly fell over the winding mountain road smoothing out the scary ghostly contours of rocky gorges. The moon came out and hung like a mandarin orange in the crotch between the mountain peaks. In about an hour and a half when Bill and Sonia were dozing off in the back seat Viktor pulled over in the narrow recess and stopped by a small spring gushing from the rock. He took out a small wooden case, spread a colourful oil cloth on the trunk and laid out still warm pieces of bread, smoked cheese, red grapes, and a gallon of wine. Sonia looked at him in disbelief.

“You wouldn’t drink on this road at night,” she pleaded.

“I won’t, he said, you will... please, just a glass to my mom and dad.”

He invited us to come to the edge of the cliff.

“Look,” he said.

At the very bottom of the gorge, stretched along the narrow valley we saw the silhouettes of about a hundred houses huddled along the Alazani River. The lights coming through the windows cast yellowish ripples along the dark water.

“It’s a Cossacks village. My folks live there.”

I explained to Bill and Sonia that under Catherine II, Cossack units were brought and settled in Georgia to defend the Empire borders. Ever since the Cossacks lived in peace with the Georgians and some assimilated into the local culture and traditions. We drank to his Mom and Dad, and I saw him cheat on his promise not to drink, well... why not. That was the last time when I visited peaceful Georgia.

We left Tbilisi next day. I don’t think Bill ever wrote about that night... Next time we met was in 1981 when Bill came to Moscow to teach at the Faculty of Journalism and then in May of 1998 in Toronto when I already lived in Canada.

Bill and Sonia invited me, my wife and son to visit them in Cummington, MA. “...we have a large house, Bill wrote, and would be delighted to put you, Natasha and George up for several days....”

I kept postponing the trip. First years after the relocation were rather bumpy, and I didn’t feel it was right to burden Bill and Sonia with my challenges. We correspond-

ed but never met again.

Much water has flowed under the bridge since the last time I visited the Soviet Georgia with the Smiths. Georgia, now an independent country was slowly recovering from the devastating war with Russia in which it lost almost 20% of its territory.

In those days we already lived in Canada and came to Tbilisi to celebrate our son George’s wedding and meet his fiancé’s Tamara extended and very warm Georgian family. After the festivities, our hosts took the newlyweds, their immediate family and friends to the bride’s family nest, the town of Khobi, some 156 miles west of Tbilisi. Part of the route ran through the places we travelled through with Bill and Sonia Smith.

In the early afternoon of May 2010, Our 15-seater Mercedes bus rolled into a muddy stop filled with the savory smells of burning charcoal, lamb kebabs, and coffee. The stop was squeezed between the mouth to the Rikoti mountain pass tunnel and a row of log stands with boarded up windows, huddled at the very foot of the mountain range. When we left Tbilisi, it was hot and pleasant, but in the mountains the temperature dropped to about 40°F. A few vendors and a pack of stray dogs welcomed our party. We bought hot kebabs rolled in cold corn buns and tried to keep ourselves warm with stale coffee brewed for hours in the blackened



pots. The dogs first kept some distance but as we fed them with pieces of buns moved closer. We were still busy feeding the tail-wagging dogs when a large troop-transporting truck rolled into the area. Bearded soldiers in dusty field jackets jumped from the truck. The active fighting in the 2008 Russia–Georgia war had ended almost two years ago but minor border skirmishes continued. The new border with the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia controlled by the Russian troops was only seventeen kilometers away and these front-line fighters were going home for a brief break.

“No Russian please.” warned our Georgian host.

Too late. The soldiers overheard us chatting in Russian but showed no animosity. The vendors offered them free bread and coffee and they joined us in our merry dog feeding. What a contrast, I thought remembering the stories of pervasive hostility in Russia during the war towards anyone with a Georgian name. A friend of mine who had a Moscow born Georgian manager had to bribe the local authorities who demanded to fire him. We didn’t even mention that we actually came from Canada. When we got back on the bus, the soldiers waved us farewell, and we wished them stay safe. ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we’d love to read them. We won’t publish your whole name.

Dream April 2024

I jump over the railing of the crowded stairwell and I begin to float. Like a balloon, languid and drifting on the air in perfect balance against gravity.

Which is not at all what I wanted, which was to fall safely, quickly, to the ground floor and get on to class.

So I begin reaching out and pulling myself down on the banisters of the stairs. Which, surprisingly, works. Who would have thought?

Lee - cyberspace

continued from page 3

that. I can always care less about something.

Epilogue: The world keeps turning and anyone looking at the writing community's posts would think we've all lost our everloving, blue-eyed minds. Something I found in my own notes - "*I made my wife dinner for Valentine's Day smacks troublingly of cannibalism.*"

And speaking of the changing language, I recently told my oldest daughter that there was a time when television ads used to try and get housewives to buy a particular brand of dishwashing liquid because it would keep its bubbles longer, and therefore wash more dishes. The selling point was that you saved some number of pennies per meal, and sure, wasn't that what you wanted to do to help out around the household?

Her response to me? *Dad, what the fuck is a housewife?*

Boom, baby.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

Contributors:

Mark Smith writes, "I live in Austin, Texas. I retired two years ago and am pursuing my lifelong love of writing. I won the Austin Book Award for a book of short stories in 1992 and have had numerous stories published in academic and small press publications—most recently last year in *Inlandia Journal*—as well as a book for children published by Albert Whitman some years ago.

Dr. Victor Pogostin lives just outside Toronto, Ontario, is the author of the Blotter Books volume **Russian Roulette** (find it on Amazon), and has these great stories about his well-spent youth. He is currently working on a second volume of true tales.

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“Who gave these idiots
microphones?”

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