

GRAHAM REID

The Idiot Boy Who Flew
—*And Other Travels in Elsewhere*



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DEDICATION

As always, to my sons Julian, AB and Cymon Reid who are out there in the world on their own journeys. Travel safe and long my darlings. As musicians you are doing God's work in this world.

To my wife Megan Stünzner whose love and support and companionship—at home and abroad—has enriched my life immeasurably and sustains me.

And to my parents, Graham Paterson Reid (1913–1986) and Margaret Noble Lamb Reid, nee Stevens (1922–2004). Thank you in your sad absence: you made travel seem part of the contract of living. I miss you more with every whispering day.

A TRUE STORY

When I was about 10 and seated at the family dinner table, my father asked me that most annoying of all questions a parent might ask a child: “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

I am told I answered without hesitation.

“A tourist”.

Introduction



“The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.”—St Augustine

RECENTLY I WAS in a bookshop looking at its extensive travel section: I was disappointed. Not because the books were dull, quite the opposite in fact. They seemed heroic and thrilling.

I scanned titles which suggested these courageous authors had donned shoeboxes and tramped across the Gobi Desert, had walked barefoot from Caracas to Cape Horn, or went to somewhere as unfamiliar as Kryptikistan where they bought a donkey-driven truck to be dragged through those old Soviet republics in the worst winter in living memory. . .

Or they went to Malawi. . .

I looked at these bent shelves of arduous, and vicarious, journeys and thought these writers were all such hardy souls and their books were so. . .

Well in truth, I asked myself: who does such things other than travel writers looking for a marketable story?

I admired the fortitude of these robust adventurers and have sometimes even read of their travels among the ice-cold Inuit, those sand-whipped Arabs, or people who'd just as soon pull out a blowpipe as welcome you into their village.

But that—ice cold and the blowpipe aside—is not what I have done in my recent travels. As with most people, I don't have the time or inclination to do up a broke-axle double-decker bus I bought in Brixton and take off for a year into some snow-driven landscape in search of a story.

My travel is more fundamental, more simple I guess: I go places—and I meet people. Admittedly these are sometimes unusual places and quite often the people are slightly mad, but that is in the nature of travel.

Certainly I have been in dangerous places, have deliberately or unwittingly found myself in some serious scrapes, been where men carry guns or poisonously evil ideologies, and where women are permanently angry and disenfranchised.

And I have undertaken foolhardy journeys into that great wherever that I call "Elsewhere".

I have survived and usually enjoyed the unfamiliar food which famous television chefs make a great fuss about for the amusement of people on the couch at home.

Frankly, it's no big deal. Anyone can eat snake if they are offered some and feel so inclined.

I have been so inclined.

So when I have travelled I have eaten badly and well, sometimes spent hours in conversation with people when we don't have a single word in common, been in odd and unhealthy corners of the planet, and I have slept in rooms I care not to think about anymore.

I don't go looking for these things: they just happen in the course of my travel which is occasionally comfortable but is mostly economic, often tiring and—despite the odds and the unhappily unexpected—always rewarding.

And everywhere—unless the journey proves otherwise because they were hateful, base or corrupt lowlifes—it has always been people, people, people. . .

That is why the first section of this book—a follow-up to my earlier *Postcards From Elsewhere*—opens with Encounters in Elsewhere. These are pieces about people I have met, almost always by accident.

In that section you may read of certifiably crazy men, poor people, some wealthy beyond our imagining, and of ordinary folk for whom every day is just another footstep on a journey to the inevitable.

Everything is the truth as I have seen it, but as I mentioned in my introduction to *Postcards from Elsewhere*, the Rastafarians have a saying I respect: No truth, only versions.

They are the Encounters in Elsewhere which open this unashamedly free-wheeling collection.

As with many who travel, I have also been fortunate to find myself in unexpected places which have unusual histories or strange stories attached to them:

a museum in a nowhere and expansive landscape in America's Pacific Northwest which was stacked with Rodin sculpture and exotic chess sets; odd little round houses in a small and seldom-visited part of Italy; the self-indulgent retreat of exotically Islamic art near hedonistic Honolulu; the antebellum home of an American country singer which is gaudy yet fascinating for what it says about that world of earthy honesty and downhome wealth; a luxurious hotel in a 16th century monastic retreat in Italy. . .

Sometimes sublime food and wine are tangentially the subject; in others it may be disconcerting low-rent bars for the homeless and the hurting; in another it may be unnerving people; or simply me stumbling into a place which seemed dislocated from its surroundings.

These places make for the Unexpected in Elsewhere section.

The curiously novelistic title given to this collection however—*The Idiot Boy Who Flew*—is taken from the final, longer story, one which weaves through time and place, and is my search for an Italian saint I had briefly read about.

My chance encounter of his long-forgotten name in a distressingly cheap, mouldy and unprepossessing book became my guide into. . .

In truth, I didn't know what. It was an adventure—but involved a decent rental car and not an old bus I had done up myself.

A few of these writings have been published previously, others are my original longer versions now freed of the constraints of space which magazines and news-

papers impose. The majority arrive here for the first time.

As with *Postcards From Elsewhere*, the many and varied writing styles will doubtless confuse and irritate as many readers as they may amuse and please.

So be it.

I have ordered the collection so that, despite the heroically geographic leaps and sometimes sideways slips through time, the pieces lead into each other through similarity, or bump up against what follows by uncomfortable counterpoint.

For me that makes sense: that is what travel is about. Our past and the present, the familiar and frighteningly unusual can all collide in that moment when you are There. Wherever that There might be.

I believe we carry with us, wherever we go, some collective memory of our various pasts: those cheap songs we heard in childhood or the lost teenage years which now have some crazily dislocated resonance; the glimpse of a stranger's face at a marketplace who reminds us of a lover long gone; something as simple as the compellingly foul shit-whiff of an alley in a country left behind a week, a month or possibly a decade ago.

Or the sheer joy in that moment when you know you are There, whoever You might be at that moment.

Travel is complex, irritating, uncomfortable, shot through with the unexpected and the rare, and only ever makes sense because the common thread—the only singular thing in all of these fragments of our lives—is that fickle and foolhardy You.

In this book I hope sometimes you can see me as

that You.

So for me to impose some over-arching concept on such diverse content, dissimilar people and different places, and writing styles which are determined by the subject and the unexpected encounters would be...

Well, it would be artificial, like so many of those books on the shelves I mentioned at the outset.

These stories are what happened to me. They could just as easily have happened to you. And I hope one day something similarly interesting does. Not the ones which involve guns and bad places though.

Needless to say, for not one of these stories or encounters did I pull on shoeboxes or walk great distances. I didn't buy a horse.

I ate one though. That is here too.

Auckland, Summer 2008
www.elsewhere.co.nz

PART I

Encounters in Elsewhere: People

Night of the Hunters

(Oregon, USA)



SONNY—THAT’S WHAT the big bellowing men called him—runs a restaurant in Klamath Falls, a town in central Oregon halfway between San Francisco and Portland. His place, the Dynasty, boasts “authentic Chinese food”. Sonny is from Taiwan.

This town was originally called Linkville, but a century or so ago the locals decided they wanted a more dramatic name for their home on the edge of the Upper Klamath Lake. So they named it after the waterfall nearby.

Regrettably, damming and changes of water courses means that today there are no falls in Klamath Falls, dramatic or otherwise.

The town is within an easy drive of picturesque Crater Lake National Park so the small airport is busy bringing in tourists and tramps, and Sonny’s place

on the southern entry does a good trade with people coming up from California. Klamath Falls is just across the state line.

The petite and nervous woman from India in the motel near Sonny's recommended his place to me when I asked if there was somewhere nearby I could have a drink and quietly read the local papers.

And that's what I was doing at Sonny's when the Big Bellowing Men arrived.

"Lotsa shrimp, big jumbo prawns and not too hot," one demanded with a rafter-shaking boom as he took his place in the bar, a room beside the family-style restaurant.

"No, no. Hot, but not hot-hot," says Sonny taking their orders then racing off to the kitchen.

The Big Bellowing Men settle in ordering beers and shooters as Sonny brings plates of steaming food then waits patiently behind the bar as they eat, yell into cellphones and bellow at each other.

"Man, she likes you and she ain't nast-ee. Marty knows some nast-ee women, but she ain't one."

Sonny stands behind his bar waiting, listening to all this.

"I can't remember what I said to her, but she liked my package."

The Big Bellowing Men laugh and Sonny waits quietly.

"Hey, where'd he go? He go outside for a smoke?"

Sonny stands and waits.

"So he says this at my Mom's birthday. You think I'm gonna put up with that shit from him? He may be

family but I'm takin' him down, man."

Sonny waits.

This goes on for half an hour, Sonny sometimes jumping to get more beers or fill another shot glass. I sit further down the bar reading about what a volatile little town this used to be a century and a half ago. Local history records that fistfights were as much part of the entertainment as theatres, saloons and brothels.

"And you know what," one of them bellows at Sonny, "why don't you get me a barbecue pork pack with hot mustard and some fries to go?"

Sonny runs off to the kitchen again.

In a rare silence I am spotted and invited with a wave to sit with the Big Bellowing Men. We chat as they pack away dozens of prawns, plates of sliced beef and mushrooms, and fish pieces with fried rice.

I ask one of the guys with arms like torpedos what they are doing in town.

The reason for their appetites and high spirits is because they've been invited down by some local farmers to shoot on their spreads. They'll shoot tomorrow, party tomorrow night, then drive back home to Portland on Sunday.

Torpedo Man in a plaid shirt and flak jacket has a handshake that can crush iron, and another of the Big Bellowing Men can barely hear and has to cup his hand over one ear. He did two tours of duty in Vietnam based in Danang. I have been there so we have a bit to talk about.

Another guy, Deaf-Vet's brother as it turns out, tells me his son is just back from Iraq but has signed

on for another tour.

We all go quiet for a bit to consider that.

One of the other guys—big, but a Non-Bellowing Man—just sits silent, looking into his stir-fry and coffee cup.

“He’s all right,” whispers Torpedo Man. “But don’t give him no trouble.”

I deliberately avoid eye contact so as not to give him no trouble. Later, when I offer to pay for the coffees we’ve ordered from an increasingly nervous Sonny, the Silent One looks at me, says nothing for a while, then mutters, “I think I’ll pay for my own. If it’s all right with you.”

The way he measures out his words with what seems like calculated menace suggests it might be unwise to take this personally.

But Torpedo Man is in a chatty, beer-filled mood and tells me he works in a factory on the Columbia River. I guess it to be one of those hellfire places belching fumes I have seen a few days before. We talk about politics for a bit—I second-guess their view on Iraq—and about how dramatic the landscape is around here.

A table of slight and obviously uncomfortable Indian men having dinner in the corner—they are staying at my motel, relatives of the owners—have tolerated the noise for long enough and leave like whispers of smoke, hoping not to draw attention to themselves.

A guy built like an oak comes in with his wife and takes a seat further down the bar.

Sonny serves them. Then he serves the Big Bellowing Men again, then me. Perspiration is visible on his

brow and upper lip.

I go to the panelled bathroom and when I come back shouting has started.

Oakman has taken offence at a look from one of the Big Bellowing Men. He is on his feet, fists clenched, chest like a truck. His wife is hitting him on the back to stop him but his anger and horny hide make him oblivious to her.

Sonny, the top of his head barely reaching Oakman's chest, is standing between him and the Big Bellowing Men trying to restrain him. Oakman shouts curses and threats.

For some reason—the beer with brandy chasers no doubt—I try to interpose my body too. I also think this is an opportune time to ask Sonny which part of Taiwan he is from. The room is swimming with fury and tension, Oakman barely knows Sonny and I are there trying to restrain him. He shouts and curses over our heads.

The Big Bellowing Men don't move from their stools which prevents things from exploding. I fall away. Sonny and Oakman's wife hustle him out the door amidst more curses and threats.

I rejoin the Big Bellowing Men who laugh and resume their drinking.

"Hey Sonny, you should've done your kung-fu on him," says one of the Big Bellowing Men to a sweating Sonny as he lurches back into the bar.

Sonny says tightly that he doesn't know kung-fu and takes his place behind the bar waiting to serve them more drinks, a double-something which we toast

PREVIEW ENDS...