

A SWISS-MISS IN THE BIG EASY

By Robert Tilleard

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Flying to New Orleans from England I have to change at Philadelphia. It's early evening in the departure lounge.

International airports have a world-wide homomorphy. Their similar architecture, especially the interiors, conspire to trick the traveller into thinking he is not travelling. He goes from one monotonous corridor to another identical one, a thousand miles away, causing a subconscious assumption that nothing has occurred and he isn't actually travelling. But of course, he is travelling and, like me, is uncomfortable and bored.

The departure lounge is a desultory scene of passengers boarding our flight, group by group, as each 'zone' is called. This is my first time on American soil – or, more properly, treated concrete – and I can neither understand the boarding system nor the language. PA systems are designed to make words indistinguishable, so the announcement in a foreign tongue is gobbledygook to my ears. I ask a girl sitting near me to translate. She explains, but in an unidentifiable accent which I assume is from some obscure region of the States.

As we shuffle through to board I feel I'm being followed. I glance behind and see, close by my shoulder, the girl. We board, I find my seat, I see the girl is getting into the seat right behind me. After landing at New Orleans, I retrieve my bag from the overhead locker and glance down at the still sitting girl, and politely ask if she had a good flight – as if I'm some sort of insincere flight

attendant. She looks up and smiles and says in her unidentifiable accent, "It was OK, thank you".

I always travel light, so I by-pass the luggage carousel and go straight to Customs and then to Arrivals, where Jon Cleary is to meet me.

I haven't seen Jon for thirty-eight years, since 1975, when I was teaching in a school in rural Kent. He was a thirteen-year-old in my class. I was twenty-five and in my first job as an art teacher. I was the form-master to a group of 12/13-year-old boys and girls. The twelve-year difference in ages then is of nothing now, but then, I was to them a grown-up and they, to me, were a bunch of bright, vital, fun kids. Every morning I looked forward to seeing them – all thirty-one of them.

Jon, aged seventeen, and immediately after his 'A' levels, moved to New Orleans. He is now fifty-one and a piano player in the Crescent City; aged thirteen he was a very good blues guitarist.

At the school, Tuesday afternoons were free of formal lessons and form teachers were instructed to devise extempore events with their class. With my group of imaginative and talented, and naughty, boys and girls this was never a problem. One of the many activities was Jon performing on a stage made of desks, playing his guitar and singing Delta blues. Other teachers, not knowing what to do with their class, would ask if the kids could come as 2TILS audience.

But now, in Arrivals, there is no sign of him. I, of course, wait and wait. I have his phone number but no phone. I don't have his address so I am stranded if he doesn't show. Then I see the girl

from the plane. She too has had to wait for a friend, a girl from New Orleans called Meredith, who has only just arrived.

I ask Meredith if she will ring the phone number I have for Jon. I show her a scrap of paper with Jon's name on it. She says: 'Jon Cleary? I was waiting on his table only last night'. This is the first hint to me that in New Orleans Jon is well-known. She rings the number and Jon answers and says he is just around the corner.

We meet after thirty-eight years. There is no problem in recognition because by now, except for us four, the arrivals area is empty.

I introduce the two girls to Jon. Meredith seems a little in awe at meeting Jon. Meredith is a dancer in New Orleans and a waitress to make ends meet.

The girl from the plane is called Ursula and is German – hence the accent – she is a law student. We all agree we should meet again so we swap e-addresses.

Jon takes me to a bar in the city where we meet-up with Jon's record producer and friend, John Porter, who used to play guitar in Roxy Music.

Jon lives in a ward [a district] called Bywater close to the French Quarter. His house is an old rambling building. He has a large music and recording studio taking up the ground floor. He and Trish, his wife, live on the next two floors. Jon has a cottage-upright piano in the second-floor entrance hall which he cannot pass without playing New Orleans rhythm and blues.

On my first morning, we drive the short distance to the French Quarter. On the way, we stop to watch a television crew filming a scene for Tremé, the TV series about the aftermath of the flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Trish is there, she is the wardrobe assistant.

Standing on a traffic island is a lone figure – one of the actors waiting for his call. I say to Jon: "Isn't that Clarke Peters, the actor?" Jon says yes it is and that he's a friend of his. Clarke sees Jon and comes over to the car. I wind-down my window. Clarke sees me and does a double-take and says in one long gasp: "Tilleard! What-the-fuck-are-you-doing-here-you-motherfucker!". I tell him I'm staying with Jon and explain to Jon that Clarke before he was famous, was my neighbour in rural Wiltshire. I get out and we embrace and laugh at the ridiculous coincidence. Clarke is now, of course, a major player in film and television. Just before 'Tremé', he was in 'The Wire'. We arrange to meet in the evening for a tour of the bars and see some New Orleans bands.

After the obligatory visit to the French Quarter and a beer in a bar in Bourbon Street, we return to Jon's home.

Where there is an e-mail waiting from Ursula, who wants to know where we are as she is not far away, and she'd like to come over on Meredith's bicycle. I mail back with instructions. I venture out into the street to intercept her and see in the distance, down the long street, a lone figure on a bike. (The streets are on a grid system – the street parallel to Jon's is 'Desire' - the one with a Streetcar named after it.). As the figure nears I

notice how pretty she is: a gamine with shortish hair, slim, thirty years old - the Swiss seem to be eternal students - with high cheek-bones and a becoming overbite, like that of one of my favourite Hollywood actresses - Gene Tierney.

When she learns that Jon, Trish, Clarke and I are to tour the music bars tonight she asks if she and Meredith can join us. We, of course, are delighted. That evening we pick up the two girls at Meredith's tiny apartment in a rough area contiguous to Bywater. And we pick up Clarke from his bachelor lodgings.' We have in Jon an expert guide, so we head to Frenchmen Street in Marigny, which is between Bywater and The French Quarter. Frenchmen's is the hub for New Orleans' music bars.

We drift from one dark bar to another. The bands and singers perform all the New Orleans styles: Jazz, Creole and Cuban, ragtime, blues, and rhythm and blues. Some people recognize Jon and Clarke, but they are left alone. Trish tells me of one Mardi Gras when she made a mask for Jon so he could be incognito, but many strangers still called out: 'Hi Jon! Love yer music, Jon'.

Meredith and Ursula stick together, going into little huddles - I think Meredith is a little intimidated by the presence of Jon and Clarke. I later learn that her boyfriend is Benh Zeitlin the director of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, which, while we are in New Orleans, is nominated for four Academy Awards.

The next morning Jon takes me in his car to the Lower Ninth ward, which is next to Bywater on the eastern side. The Lower Ninth was the first part of New Orleans to be flooded after Hurricane Katrina. It's eight years since Katrina, yet it is still in everyone's daily consciousness. The trauma is real. Even after eight years the poor, black ward of the Lower Ninth still bears the scars. We drive around the whole area which looks like a mouth that has been punched, showing gaps where houses should be. The houses are one-storied and wooden, and about every third one is missing. The uninsured homes were abandoned - a lot of people left for the duration, to stay in other towns and cities with friends and relatives, and never returned. One can see the rare, insured homes because they are the only ones that have been repaired. Each house still has on it a St Andrew's cross

spray-painted in black; perhaps kept as a memorial: the left-hand quadrant has the initials of the search party, and which State they were from; the top quadrant is the date of the search; the right-hand quadrant indicates hazards, such as escaping gas; the bottom quadrant indicates the number of dead found in the house. In the whole city, 1,500 people died.

Jon shows me Fats Domino's house. Fats Domino was born and brought up in the Lower Ninth and despite becoming hugely successful and wealthy stayed on in his home ward. The only sign of his wealth is his one-story house is made of brick and a bit larger than his neighbours'.

We drive up to one of the first leveés to be breached by the Mississippi and flooded the Lower Ninth, there we see, spray painted on the ground in large letters the words: R.I.P RUF1. The river at this point is a mile wide. It is frighteningly Mighty.

On our way back we go through Tremé ward to Congo Square where the seeds of Jazz were planted (Tremé is the oldest African-American neighbourhood in the States). Before 1819 the slaves were allowed to congregate on Sundays, but anywhere they could find. In 1819 the Code Noir was created that forced the slaves to use only Congo Square, where a market was created and there was singing and dancing accompanied by music played on improvised instruments – the beginnings of Jazz.

Quite late one night in the Lower Ninth Jon takes me to a black working man's bar. It's very dark inside, with just a barman and two other customers and us – two white, middle-class, middle-aged, well-spoken Englishmen. We are received as friends. A drunken old boy comes in - he starts complaining about his eight children, born to his five wives. They have all forgotten his birthday. It is also his dog, Jo-Jo's birthday and his children have remembered to send Jo-Jo cards but none to him. He is a happy drunk and laughs at his own complaining.

Jon was on tour when Katrina struck. His house was severely flooded so he and Trish stayed away for a number of months. All that time the city had no electricity. When they returned they were immediately told that the whole population must, because of the fear of disease, seal with gaffer tape every fridge and freezer in NO. National Guardsmen would take them away to be

destroyed. When their fridge was eventually moved, a small, black, stinking slick emerged and a Guardsman threw-up.

After three days I'm thinking of hiring a car and exploring Louisiana. I mention this to a friend of Trish who says I must go to the Café des Amis in Breaux Bridge near Lafayette. She explains that every year, on the Saturday before Mardi Gras, there is the annual Zydeco festival. She says Zydeco fans from all over the States and Canada make a pilgrimage to the Café des Amis. And I must stay nearby, in a Bayou cabin.

This is the first time I had heard of Zydeco. I learn that it is Creole music exclusive to Louisiana. It's a mixture of blues, rhythm and blues, country and western and the music of the native peoples of Louisiana. It's a relative of Cajun music. The name is alleged to come from the Creole pronunciation of, 'Les haricots [zydeco] ne sont pas salés', - there is no salt on the beans - meaning: 'I'm tired because I'm poor'. I determine I must go.

Ursula - who has bicycled over for coffee, and has heard all that Trish's friend has said - asks if she can come with me. This is complicating things: she is half my age; I hardly know her; she is a student on a limited budget; surely she is here to see her friend, Meredith; and where do we stay? I tell her it might be difficult, but she says we can sort things out when we get there. It is, of course, flattering that she trusts me, and is prepared to venture into the unknown depths of Louisiana with a stranger. I give in and say yes. That night I am to cook a Jambalaya for Jon and Trish, so, thinking it would be sensible to get to know Ursula a little before we go, I ask her if she and Meredith would like to join us for supper?

Jambalaya is essentially a mixture of meat and seafood and rice. I'm doing ham (jamon) and prawns and rice (paella), hence the name from when New Orleans was French after being Spanish. I am lovingly cooking it when Ursula and Meredith arrive. I am about to assemble it - the combining of all the ingredients is essential to the dish - when Ursula announces she doesn't like prawns. So I have to keep the prawns separate. From tiny acorns of irritation do mighty oaks of annoyance grow.

A few days later we set off in a hire car.

When leaving New Orleans one drives over Lake Pontchartrain on the Causeway – it's the longest bridge in the world: thirty-eight kilometres. We drive to Baton Rouge past spooky-looking swamps and on towards Lafayette. On the way, we stop for a coffee for Ursula and a can of beer for me –she complains about me drinking and driving.

Eventually, in remote countryside we find the little complex of small wooden Bayou cabins run by a delightful husband and wife. The wife shows us around to choose a cabin. I am assuming that we are to have separate cabins next to each other and Ursula will pay for hers. We find some suitable ones with a connecting boardwalk. Ursula says she is scared to be on her own. It is remote and has the feel of a scene from the 'Blair Witch Project'. She says that she is happy to share a double bed with me. All this negotiating is going on in front of the owner's wife, who is amused but sympathetic. She then says there is one cabin with two bedrooms but a little more expensive – which I take.

Later we go in search of a restaurant. On a highway, we see a billboard advertising a restaurant. There, in a field on its own and garishly lit is a large red brick building. We park and enter the hallway where a floor to ceiling wall has written inscriptions detailing all the people and bands who have played there – from Bob Dylan to ZZ Top? Tonight it is just a restaurant.

It is packed. We settle at a table for two. Around me, I notice that everybody is a middle-aged red-necked local, both male and female. Not one black face. Until I notice, sitting at a crowded table is a black girl. Then she rises and stands behind the woman sitting next to her and pulls out the woman's wheelchair. The only black person is a servant. At least she is sitting with them.

We eat and I have a few glasses of wine. Ursula disapproves. She comes from a family of Swiss Calvinists – both her parents are pastors. She is a student in Zurich and shares a house with ten other students so she hardly leads a sheltered life.

When we get back to the cabin we retire to our separate rooms

I switch on my television and watch, of all things, a BBC production of Othello on the PBS channel.

Ursula comes into my bedroom complaining she is cold. She gets into my bed and cuddles up to me. Is this sexual? If it's not then she is a very trusting person – we are in a remote cabin in the depths of Louisiana. I am twice her age and a year younger than her father. She continues to cuddle. This *is* sexual. She says, in her German accent: “But I do not do kissing”. We continue for some time, but suddenly she pulls away. I am bemused.

She begins to confess: During the previous week, she tells me, she had been in Cairo on business for the Swiss Development Corporation – they had asked her because she spoke Arabic. She had been given a driver/guide, a young Egyptian student who was moonlighting. She didn't like him because of his Arabic attitude towards women, especially Western women. However, because of their propinquity, she got to know him better and thought, ironically, and stupidly, that if she slept with him he might change his mind – besides she was physically attracted to him. So she did – and it was good. She says she thinks it is too soon after Cairo for her to have sex with me. There is an unkind phrase used to describe her behaviour – it's to do with teasing. The Egyptian boy is sending her texts, which irritates her because she has told him not to make contact.

But she has planted a different kind of irritating acorn which I knew should not be allowed to grow. Whatever did or didn't, happen, I am flattered.

The Café des Amis and the Zydeco festival starts at eight in the morning, the idea being that you have breakfast/brunch, and listen to the bands, dance till you drop - at lunchtime. We get there soon after nine. The café, in the small town of Breaux Bridge, from the outside looks ordinary, except one half-expects horses to be tethered at a hitching post. There is a long queue, but the patient customers dance in couples in the dusty street to the music wafting from the café. The interior is large enough to accommodate about a hundred or more people. The bands are live and loud and rocking, and everybody is vibrant, sexy, dancing, eating and drinking and having a good time.

Except for Ursula, who hates it all. She disapproves of me having a beer at that time of the morning; she disapproves of a black guy dancing with every

girl who wants to dance with him – nearly all white girls; she disapproves of a white guy dancing with every girl he can find – he’s a great dancer; she hates the music. She suffers for her Calvinism – because I’m not moving. This is a girl who only a few hours ago uninhibitedly climbed into my bed, and here is a description of her tattoos:

Upper right arm: an oval antique frame in the middle of which is a Roman ‘X’. Don’t ask.

Upper left arm: a lamp with a bulb and wires. She says she had it done when she was in ‘a dark place’.

Upper thigh: a series of large black dots ascending to her crotch.

Back in the Big Easy, the city is getting ready for Mardi Gras. They start getting ready as soon as the last one finishes. There are parades during the week before Mardi.

Jon, Trish, John Porter, and his wife Linda and I, go to a downtown parade. Linda was once a Vogue model and girlfriend of Keith Richards. She is famously responsible for the British discovery of Jimi Hendrix. She saw Hendrix in New York and told Chas Chandler of him, who brought Hendrix to London.

It is a gay parade where the participants camp it up to 11 on the amplifier. Later as we drift through the back streets to our car, a woman screams from her front window: “ Hey Jon, love yer music, Jon, I’ve got a picture of you on my kitchen wall, Jon”. We pass a house, in the front garden of which is a bunch of guys, unknown to us, playing rhythm and blues. They recognize Jon and ask him to play with them. Jon is game and they all launch into New Orleans standards. The guys are thrilled.

Mardi Gras starts early, so we are ready about nine o'clock. Trish is dressed up, looking pretty and glamorous. She is going off for the day with girl friends. Jon and I are meeting John and Linda. When we meet Linda says to me: “We haven’t got any mushrooms”, and disappears. We wait for her and she returns having tracked down some chocolate brownies laced with magic mushrooms,

She gives me a bite, but after a while, there is no effect - she gives me another bite. Fifteen minutes later I'm out of it. Psychotropic drugs have never agreed with me. I find a bumblebee is concerned about me and is looking after me. But it's a young friend of John and Linda's dressed as a bumblebee. It takes a couple of hours for the effects to wear off, but it's Mardi Gras and normal life is suspended anyway.

Jon tells me of a Mardi Gras when Trish had made him a costume of pink leopard-print. A problem in Mardi Gras is the number of people and the shortage of loos. Jon was forced to pee behind a bush. A booming voice behind says: "Clear it up". It's an armed policeman who makes Jon clean up his wee with his beautiful pink leopard-print jacket.

A chap dressed as the cyclist Lance Armstrong, with a drip bottle affixed to his arm, is talking to his wife, who is dressed as Oprah Winfrey. I'm sure I recognize his voice. I do, it's Montgomery Burns's from The Simpsons. It's not the magic mushrooms.

A man is dressed from head to toe as a cannabis plant. A cloud of cannabis smoke is billowing out of him - you can't not inhale it. A woman walks innocently through the cloud with a child in her arms; both of whom, I presume, are now stoned.

Outside a walk-up house, Jon bumps into a friend an old black guy who is one of the great New Orleans drummers. He invites all of us in. Layed-out is a feast and a bar to which we are told to help ourselves. On the wall is a photo of Jon's friend at the White House shaking hands with Nixon.

One of the traditions of Mardi Gras, which refers to slavery, is a float - a converted double-decker bus - with a Krewe [the name for the social clubs, and Mardi Gras organizers] called The Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club who are *blacked-up* black guys. Perhaps they think that with the passing of the years they are not now as 'black' as their slave or Zulu forebears?

All the Krewes throw heavy strings of beads, known as doubloons, into the crowd. Jon tells me they know how each year's carnival compares with other years when the street cleaners, at the end of the day, take all the millions of beads and have them weighed

There is an experimental composition by the early American modernist composer Charles Ives that depicts the sound of two brass bands, playing different tunes, marching towards each other and the cacophony when they clash. This happens to me here. It includes a large crowd of costumed revellers. The sound is of colliding players, and revellers, noise and chaos and the crashing of brass instruments and drums.

In the evening we are all invited somewhere to someone's house. We sit, exhausted, in the garden where there is a large pond. For some reason, Jon and I dare each other to jump in. We strip naked and jump in – it's cold. Oh well ... it's Mardi Gras.

It will soon be time for me to go to LA. One morning I am talking to Jon and Trish about my train to LA when Ursula arrives, having bicycled over again. She asks if she can come with me. My heart sinks. How can I say no, without sounding unkind? So I am blunt and ask her how she can afford it? And how does she think she can get back to the Crescent City? I am travelling on an expensive sleeper train – it takes two days and two nights. I don't know what a single supplement costs, and even whether one is available? She says she can afford it – I have heard Swiss further education grants are generous, and last forever. I say to her she must first find out the cost and availability. After Trish's help with phone numbers, she rings the station. And comes back to say it's fine and that she can fly back from LA. As it turned out she came with me in the car to San Francisco and flew back from there.

This is almost a *fait accompli*. It is not like I want the company – I prefer travelling alone, and Ursula has form for being irritating. But I am still flattered by a pretty young girl wishing to be with me. So, against my better judgement, she comes.

After she has gone Trish, in the endearingly frank and crude language native to her New York, says to me: “ That girl is a cunt!”.

The train is known, both romantically and prosaically, as the ‘Sunset Limited’. It takes us through Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California – 2,000 miles. It is a double-decker affair, with the lower section

containing the luggage, loos, kitchens and bars. Staircases take you to the upper level to the observation cars, lounges and couchette compartments.

Ursula's first words to me are: "Do not think I'm going to allow you to sleep with me."

In films involving the romance of long-distance train journeys, the compartments in the sleeping cars are spacious. Since this will probably be my last long-distance journey in a sleeper, I have decided not to stint on the luxuries. So our couchette is in First-Class – but it is not first-class. It has a sink and a loo which can be a shower, it has banquette seating, but this has to be up-ended every night so the beds can be pulled out – and reversed in the mornings. I have to get the sleeping car attendant to do it for me. And the compartment is cramped. It is a crush for two people. The *Sunset* is limited. We spend our days, out of the tiny room, in the observation cars. I even used the public loos since ours is tiny.

We leave New Orleans at ten in the morning, we start going through Texas in the early evening, we get to San Antonio about ten, to be told the train stops for four hours. Some experienced train-goers have pre-booked taxis and take-off for an evening in San Antonio's clubs.

We wake at dawn, we are still in Texas, it is lunchtime, we are in Texas, it is evening, we are in Texas, we go to bed, it is Texas.

In the observation car, Ursula reads – she won't tell me what it is she is reading. She says it changed her life. I suspect a self-help book. She hides it from me when she's not reading. I'm preparing for LA by reading Evelyn Waugh's dissection of the relationship between ex-pat Brits in LA and their American hosts – *The Loved One*.

We hardly speak. I give up trying to understand why the Swiss-Miss - as I've begun to call her - has come on this journey. My only guess is that Meredith's film director boyfriend is in New Orleans to see her – so maybe Ursula thinks she is a gooseberry. But it would be cheaper to go to a hotel than pay for a long-distance train fare. She is confirming why I like to travel on my own.

At a table diagonally opposite is a black family of six: mother, father and four grown-up children. They play cards all day and are chatting and

cheerful. If I was alone I would have asked to join them. They seem sensitive to Ursula ignoring me and I get sympathetic glances. Ahead of me is a middle-aged red-faced white guy with a permanently angry expression. He is constantly glancing at the happy black family looking with deadly disapproval. He's even wearing a check shirt.

Because I'm travelling First Class, Ursula and I have all meals for free in the dining car. This means we are forced - breakfast, lunch and dinner - to eat together and with other couples, who I chat to happily - but not Ursula. And she continues to be fussy about her food. She also continues to disapprove whenever I have a beer.

I would estimate that 70% of the land between New Orleans and LA is desert or unfertile scrub. Mile, after mile, after mile of nothing. But it is mesmerising. It is an event when a distant juggernaut can be glimpsed cruising through the parched landscape on a highway.

Approaching El Paso, for mile upon mile there is a border fence separating the USA from Mexico. At El Paso on the Texas side is the usual looking American conurbation but on the Mexican side is a poverty-ridden corrugated-iron shanty town; neatly dividing them is a high chain-link fence.

We pull into LA rail station at five-thirty in the morning. We have three hours to kill before the hire car people open. I bump into the black mother of the card-playing family eating a giant sandwich - she's a large woman. To my surprise, she greets me as if I was a long-lost member of her family. And then she gives me a great bear-hug - still clutching her sandwich.

Within minutes of driving the hire car, I'm stopped by the police. I am confused by a one-way sign that is ambiguous about which road it's indicating as one-way. The only thing to do is to assume the manner of the innocent Englishman abroad - the naive Bertie Wooster; it worked in Canada when I was stopped by the police: apologise and play the upper-class twit. The LA policeman is not as easily deceived as the Canadian one, and I fear the worse. Ursula is not practised in this sort of dissembling - in fact, she is blaming me. But the policeman lets me off with a warning, I ask him for directions and we set off for Santa Monica.

I have arranged to have lunch with an English couple I met when teaching privately in Spain. Terry and Sandra Marsh – I haven't seen them for 18 years. Terry is a retired Hollywood art director/production designer, he has two Oscars: for Doctor Zhivago and for Oliver! He was also the production designer on numerous films, including Lawrence of Arabia and the Shawshank Redemption.

We spend the morning on the Santa Monica pier – the finishing stretch of Route 66. It's buzzing because a film is being made. We are in LA.

After lunch at the Marshes in the Pacific Palisades, I ask Terry about the making of Doctor Zhivago. Ursula perks-up and shows an interest. Sitting on the bookshelf are the two Oscars. Out of their picture window, in their house in the Pacific Palisades, is a view of the vast Pacific. Sandra says the next landfall is the Antarctic.

Ursula is fascinated by Terry's stories, but not as much as when he tells us the beach below their house is where Baywatch was filmed. Ursula explains that her Calvinist pastor parents would not allow a television in the house so Ursula would sneak off to a friend's house and the programme they loved the most was Baywatch. A strange childhood of Calvinist austerity mixed with a secret lusting after rippling beach muscle.

We set-off for San Francisco. Ursula says, because I had a beer and a couple of glasses of wine, I must be drunk and shouldn't be driving. She also confesses as to how intimidated she was by the Marsh's luxurious house. She'd never been in anything like it. This from a Swiss – but a Calvinist.

I discover that there are no service stations on US highways. To find petrol one must leave the main drag and hope for the best on lesser roads. We eventually stop at a rundown-looking gas-station in the depths of the California countryside. A woman customer is in the forecourt giving a drink of water to her dog – a Yorkshire terrier. She has just come from the ladies where she has filled a bowl with water. The gas-station attendant rushes out in a panic, shouting for her to stop. He breathlessly explains that all the water in the immediate district is contaminated – not even dogs can drink it. The woman is shocked, gathers-up her pooch and drives hurriedly away. This, in the richest State in the richest country in the world. Here, the poor are forgotten.

I was told by Trish that en route to San Francisco I must stay in a hotel called The Madonna Inn; she says it is the most eccentric hotel in the States. So I book it. It is a bit weird and very kitsch, and very expensive and the service is bad. Each bedroom is a detached house cum cabin; they are scattered over acres of grounds and each one is decorated and furnished to a theme.

When I booked I asked for the 'Ice House' decorated like a large igloo, but we are given a 'Mexican' themed house. The rooms are cold and we have to work out the heating for ourselves. We have to carry our bags – I later point out to Reception that for these prices we should have a porter and someone to show us to our rooms and tells us how to operate things. They look at me as if I'm a trouble-maker – which I am.

We have supper in the main house which has ugly ornate carved furniture and an over-the-top staircase that used to be in William Randolph Hearst's nearby, spectacularly vulgar, Hearst Castle – 'Xanadu' in Citizen Kane. Our fellow guests seem very much at home in these surroundings.

In San Francisco, my hotel is well situated off Union Square. I say 'my' because Ursula tells me she is going to stay with friends of Meredith's; this is news to me. I suspect this is a fib and she is going to find or has found, another hotel.

We say goodbye and I watch her disappear into the crowds thronging the sidewalk, never to see her again.

A strange girl. This is quite brave of her; she's young and alone in a strange city. My thoughts and emotions are mixed. She turned from an interesting, attractive, intelligent, but irritating, girl who sought my company and half-attempted a seduction, into a wilful, bemusing, cold-fish. I sort of miss her because, against my better judgment, I was flattered; but I am very pleased to be alone and rid of her, but at the same time saddened. I think Trish's verdict was crude but true. I need a drink and find the nearest bar.

I sit in a corner reading my book. I go to the bar to get a second beer when next to me, a hand appears. I look up and a young handsome Indian guy is wanting to shake hands with me. I instinctively do so out of politeness. I then realise this is a gay bar and this is a pick-up – I've hardly been in San

Francisco for more than ten minutes and I'm living a cliché. He is charming and we have a long chat about his education in India and how he did an MA in electrical engineering in England – at Manchester. After a while, I think he realises I am not gay and we part company as friends.

Walking back to my hotel I'm approached by a woman of about forty. She has dyed ash-blond hair and rotten teeth. She says: "I've never done this before but, because you look so much like my late husband, I feel I can ask you for money so that I can buy some diapers for my baby daughter." An interesting pitch, but. . .

The next morning I take a bus to Haight-Ashbury, the birthplace of hippiedom and 'peace and love'. After all, although in no way a hippie, in 1967, the Summer of Love, I was beginning at art college and I met my first girlfriend.

The Haight-Ashbury turn of the 19th-century houses, once the home of communal squats, are now millionaires' homes. From Buena Vista park, which spectacularly looks down upon San Francisco, I go to a crowded café. In this home of sixties communal living and the new-found ethos of their Pilgrim ancestors, there is now a café where nobody talks to each other. I count over thirty people having coffee and all of them were looking silently into their laptop screens. And nobody thinks it was odd.

After the tourist-ridden Fisherman's Wharf, I catch a random street-car and alight at the Ferry Building. In a large square nearby is a true throwback to the sixties/seventies – a huge noisy demo. It's about the Keystone XL pipeline which is to run through a Native Reservation, so the great majority of demonstrators are Native Americans. There is a stage onto which anybody can wonder – including me. On it is a line of a dozen guys rhythmically hitting hand-held drums and a chorus of chanting men and women – like a war dance. There is, in true hippie fashion, no leader so anybody can get up and make a speech. The large number of sixty and seventy-year-olds have not, since their youth, changed their style of clothes or their hair.

Everywhere there is street-music. At night in Union Square is an informal R and B band.

On a sidewalk is a gay teenage boy, as thin as a stick-insect in tight trousers and tap shoes and a fedora, playing the trumpet with one hand and tap dancing. And being ignored.

It is the last thing I see in San Francisco.

THE END

