

Notes and Memories from the Writer's Workshop in Cape May, January 2005

Oddly enough, when I arrived at the workshop, I had dinner with a complete stranger. I was mulling about in the lobby of the hotel, hungry from my long, long bus ride. Peter popped up and in his frantic, serendipitously organized way thrust me together with a woman lounging on a sofa nearby. Her name was Jen, and she was also hungry – and an aspiring poet, and a mother of two. Turned out to be a nice conversation, even if I was more interested with flirting with Amanda and Emari, who were both working at the registration table. They seemed happy to see someone their own age too, and excited to see my yoga bag. When I first walked in we talked about attending yoga the next morning. I was happy with myself for looking my best – nice new black jacket and scarf, very New York. I thought it stood out well in Cape May. Our chatting was short but I vowed to find them later, not having expected to see anyone my own age that weekend, let alone two gorgeous girls.

Sure enough, I saw them both in the hotel bar that night, and patiently maneuvered myself to talk to Amanda for awhile. It was fun but I excused myself early to get out of the smokiness – I found my tolerance had dropped off completely from living in Bloomberg's city. Saturday night was better. But my favorite night of the workshop wasn't nearly as enjoyable for Amanda. She struck out at the Lobster House when they couldn't make her a proper turkey club – though inexplicably they could make it with only two slices of bread, explained the perfect cliché seedy diner waitress, the kind who calls you “Hon” – and stormed away just to get a speeding tickets moments later.

She came back bawling. Emari comforted her with offers of help from her father the chief of police and I tentatively lobbed a few jokes in the car. With the tension balloon-popped, the rest of the night was a mass-relief from the earlier drama. We couldn't find a pizza place, so we drove to an “Oriental Restaurant” right next to a Yarn Shop. “Have a ball at The Yarn Shop,” was the slogan I suggested in the parking lot, and added that the “Orientals” were apparently trying to even offend themselves. All the Asian restaurants in New York and I had never seen one called Oriental. I looked for flowers to get Amanda, but wandering around Brandon and I found no stores open late night in Cape May, naturally.

After eating – or rather, after watching Amanda eat since the three of us were already stuffed with greasy diner food – we laughed ourselves silly driving around, intentionally at about 12 miles per hour, gunning for pedestrians in slow-motion. Later we relaxed in the girls' room, they drank a large bottle of wine, and we listened to their poetry. It was about blow jobs and the Little Red Hen, mostly, just not in the same poem. The only downside to the relaxing latter half of the evening was the women's strategic revelations of boyfriends tucked away somewhere. It wasn't lost on Brandon and I that they failed to mention this for two days. No worries; of course we both have girlfriends in Canada anyway.

The next day I sat down for lunch at a table with strangers, with Jen the only familiar face. The other diners were older, and unfamiliar to me. One woman seemed very old and sort of snobby/rich, but as the conversation went on I realized my assumption was wrong and she was a friendly and interesting conversationalist. Everyone seemed intrigued that I was not a poet, but an artist. Well, turns out Carol Houck Smith, who I met with the previous night for her comments on my book proposals, was very chummy with this woman and sat down in the open seat between us. Soon several people got up at the front of the room and did a quick tribute to Peter, reading a few of his works. Everyone left pretty quickly after that, but Carol and I had started a conversation and we ended up speaking for almost an hour by ourselves. We mostly talked about art. Before the other woman left, the conversation had turned to the new MoMA, which I described as gorgeous to them. Then I told Carol about Grounds for Sculpture, and she told me about a mill in Connecticut that is now a large art museum. We spoke about the city, since she lives here too, and she had great praise for Gramercy Park and the trees in fall – Gingkoes, I said. She asked how I knew Peter and I surprisingly got to talk about the Bahá'í Faith a bit. When we finished I emerged to Amanda and Emari and did not hesitate to brag. They were intrigued but rationalized it a bit by describing Carol's hypothetical love for cute young men.

Sunday night there was a blackout, or a partial one at least. All of the lights in the hotel were out except the string of white holiday lights in the restaurant/bar. Since I was in there talking with Amanda, Emari and Paul-Victor, I didn't notice at first. But the DJ's music started to skip, and then die. No problem with me, it just meant fewer middle-aged women awkwardly dancing around. Later we went into the burgundy room and Peter, in his aforementioned MacGyver way, brought perfect small candles for the few of us. Naturally, we told ghost stories, or at least weird stories of things that had happened to us. Turns out Paul used to live around northern NJ, and we reminisced about Shades of Death Road, which my friend Marc and I found once driving. It meanders around the edge of a precipice and Paul explained that it's rumored it got its name from the bodies the mob used to hang from trees over the cliff. I also told everyone about the super-scary Blair Witch House we bumped into driving from Oldwick to Long Valley, off in the woods. And Paul told us about one time he was driving along a scary lake at night and saw a green orb floating above it in the distance. But it sounded Gatsby and hopeful to me, rather than scary.

The lights came on, and the mood shifted. This crazy guy, who had been the loud show-offy one during the baseball talk in the banquet hall, came over to talk. He went nuts when he found out Brandon was from Austin. He told a great story, really involved, about a bar there called Pootie's, a real dangerous dive, but he knows the owner, and he heard Guy Clark play there several times. I loved it – I couldn't make up the name Pootie's if I tried. Brandon did what he does best, and just rolled with it.

On Monday, Peter frantically tried to find a kindly soul to drive me home. I didn't have the heart to tell him I hate cars and was actually looking forward to the bus ride for some nice reading time. Paul finally volunteered to take me to Atlantic City, the first leg of my journey. From there I would take the bus the rest of the way to Port Authority. That was

fine with me – the bus from Cape May to AC was a local so going with Paul would be faster. But wouldn't you know it, just before we are about to escape, Peter comes along, having found a gosh-darn generous family more than eager to cram me into their car for a four-hour trip.

They were wonderful people to volunteer, but it was a nightmare for me. I have a real phobia about driving on highways; I've been in too many accidents and it's one reason I moved to the city and sold my car. I'm not bad with drivers I know, but strangers definitely make me anxious. And I wasn't able to hide in the back and sleep in this case. No, they generously offered me the front – ring-side seat to the madness of the Garden State Parkway. And while the folks were as nice as could be and our conversation was fine for the first minutes, it was going to be a real stretch to find something to talk about for hours on end.

But here's the kicker. We had to drive twenty minutes out of the way to pick up their dog from a kennel, to drive with us. Two facts you should know: I can't stand dogs, and the car was the opposite of spacious. I felt myself starting to crack. I felt anxiety brimming under my surface. I felt guilty for not being "normal" and enjoying dogs, and driving, which everyone else always seems to love. Worst of all, I started to feel animosity towards this kind family, who were only trying their best to help.

But I was saved. Glee flooded into me when the kennel was closed. There was a miscommunication with the owner about the times. So I wasted over an hour to get back to the Cape May bus stop, but it was worth it. They dropped me off, with no choice but to go back and wait for the kennel to re-open. I had a relaxing bus ride back, and finished two books.