

Parallel Worlds

19 November 2008

The tailcoat was electric blue, and being pressed up against the car, covered the window.

I'd seen something close to the tailcoat's color in a peacock's feathers, a shade less similar in a highland weaver's threads, and a mild resemblance in the shimmering breast of a hummingbird flitting in and out of the sun, but that was as close as my last year's memory could get to what smothered my field of view.

The tailcoat's electric blue was a color not found in nature.

Before I could recoil, the tailcoat slid away, replaced by the smooth black silk of a top hat, which was even more disorienting than the electric blue coat.

The car door swung open and the doorman's face appeared around it. In my disconnected state of mind, his dark skin, shaved head, large white teeth and broad smile created the aura of a voodoo priest assassin from an early James Bond adventure, beckoning me into his lair.

His arm swept forward and he said, "Welcome. Please, this way..."

I disembarked and walked in, moving in a daze.

As I entered, my back involuntarily straightened, my gaze hardened and a part of my mind snapped into focus.

My eyes swept over the expanse, logging the environment and all the activity within.

"Thank you," I acknowledged, and turned away from the door.

The transaction was quick and efficient. The language and its terms were familiar, all the asides flowed naturally and the rhythms arose spontaneously. It was all tack sharp, but inside my head my inner mind was screaming, "What is this place? Why does it seem so familiar? Who are these people? How do I know what to say?"

I turned away and we moved towards the waterfall. The islands of human interaction in the large space were identified and categorized unconsciously; each one was matched against known examples and slotted into its proper box by the autonomous portion of my brain that had sprung to life. Each one was familiar, but each one came from another place, an alien place, from long ago and very far away.

We swiped the card to clear security, the elevator doors closed and it lifted us toward the heavens. We all exchanged small talk. They were the right words at the correct pace in the proper order.

"Where is this chit chat coming from?" my mind asked itself.

Within minutes we were in a quiet corner of the private lounge; expansive views of the city filled the horizon. The ice clinked in her glass as Steph swirled her drink.

I calculated the years. I did the math twice and then again. The answer could not be correct.

"Six years," I said, more in wonder than shock. "What did I do with six years of my life?" I asked.

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It was not a rhetorical question. At that moment, my mind reeling, I honestly couldn't recall.

A day later we were in another city. We'd had another elevator ride, were in another private lounge with another limitless view of a metropolis unfolded in front of us. Steph's ice clinked in the glass as she swirled her drink, again made with the same, specific, imported spirits in a very particular way.

I scanned the others in the room. My mind was half in a dream-state, struggling to understand. The other half was operating. It was operating very efficiently and effectively.

Like a version of Robert Ludlum's Jason Bourne, I processed them. The four guys around the table were posers. They wouldn't survive. The perfectly coifed, confident looking guy against the glass was waiting for a contact; he needed this deal, he was desperate for this deal. Despite his perfect wardrobe and ultra-composed countenance—his panic oozed through his pores. The jovial guy with his wife didn't belong and wasn't what he pretended to be. The woman in the corner knew what she was about.

"How do I know this stuff?" my mind screamed inside.

"Wouldn't it be five years?" Steph asked, gently returning to the prior day's conversation; softly probing, like a therapist weaving a tender bridge from another world back to a chosen reality.

"No, six," I replied firmly, but not harshly, merely confidently. It was the first confident thing I'd said to her since re-entry. "It has been six since the decision. It was this same time of year, six years ago."

"How does it feel?" she asked, softly shuttling another thread across the bridge's loom.

"Like a parallel world," I replied, my gaze shifting to the evening lights of the city that defined all possible paths radiating out from those heights.

I adjusted my noise cancelling headphones and glanced out the window. Two blood red arrows spread horizontally from a point of magenta sandwiched by deep purple fading to absolute black. It was the dawn of a new day—another beginning.

An hour later we touched down. It was a smooth landing.

Ours was the first load of passengers to enter the processing area. The staff was just settling in, somewhat bleary eyed, as we reached the yellow line. A few booths to the right, an immigration officer took a sip of coffee, looked at us, flipped on his availability light, and waved us over. We were his first transaction of the day.

He chuckled as he exchanged pleasantries with Steph. I was silent, taking it all in. I could not recall an immigration officer in any of the dozens of countries I'd entered, in any of the countless scores of border crossings I'd made, who had ever chuckled. He looked at me and smiled, handed me my passport, and said, "Welcome back."

Steph sat across the aisle from me on the shuttle bus we shared with an outbound flight crew. Based on their seniority and number, one side of my brain had already pegged them: international, long haul, wide body.

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As we listened to them chat with each other and talk on their cell phones, we looked at each other. We both knew the difference. It was all in English. We were no longer in our cocoon, able to easily block out the humans in our immediate environment. We both already had our shields raised, protecting our psyches from the constant assault of conversation snippets, rattling televisions and babbling talk radio. Steph and I both felt the continuous energy investment required to block it all out. We were indeed back.

Our carry-on bags rumbled over the cobbled jet way. It was a familiar sound. The tactile wobble of the bag's handle in my hand felt familiar, but simultaneously foreign. It was something from another time and another place; a skin-close reminder of another existence, a nerve-ending message from a parallel world.

The newsstands, coffee shops and restaurants scrolled past in my peripheral vision as we walked down the concourse. Like a book read and re-read a hundred times, placed on a shelf, and then opened years later, each sight and sound was intimately known, but was arising from a long-ago place, each shaking off the dust and cobwebs of disuse as it animated.

The street was lined by neatly kept lawns and matching suburban homes. They seemed so orderly, almost sterile. They were from this side, from this world. They lacked the comforting chaos, the disorder that promised rewarding experiences seeping around the edges of the other side, the parallel world.

We were caught in between. This side, this world, was regular, structured and ordered. It was what we grew up in, what defined our formative years, part of what made us what we were, or at least what we used to be. The other side, the other world, was irregular, unstructured and disordered. It was part of what had called us, pulled us, transformed us into what we had become.

I pulled the rental car into the parking lot. The lot was also clean, orderly and almost sterile. I looked over at her and Steph smiled softly.

"Let's get something to eat," she comforted. "I think we'll both feel better."

Target acquired, I crouched on all fours, waiting to execute. I heard the target's voice down the hallway and saw the distance from the reflection in the patio doors.

I'd waited 14 months for this opportunity. I had traveled halfway around the world for this. It was my mission.

It was a one-time chance. There would only be a single opportunity. I only had one shot.

"Closer, closer," I counseled myself. "She's not in range yet."

I paced my breathing and timed my pulse, synchronizing the interlude for maximum quiescence. I needed a steady platform to offset my racing thoughts and boiling emotions. No amount of experience could fully prepare anyone for this moment. I would just have to do the best I could.

At the last possible second I sprang. The target was too close to escape. She shrieked in surprise. It was too late.

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Her arms locked around me in the longest hug of my life. She literally would not let me go.

It was my granddaughter's hug.

It was a hug strong enough to reach across and pull me into this world and hold me here—to hold me here, at least until we must return to the other world, the parallel world—the distant world so long ago and so very far away.

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Douglas Hackney endured more than 25 years of business travel before deciding to check out of the business world in the fall of 2002. During those years he flew many more than one million actual flight miles; almost all of them the hard way, domestically, while hubbed out of Chicago.

During those flights he read, among other things, every single geopolitical spy thriller written by Jean Le Carré, Robert Ludlum, Tom Clancy and many others, having already consumed all of Ian Fleming's work as a youth.



Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney, business travel survivors, are on a two to three year global overland expedition in the parallel world of developing economies.

You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel>