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Letters to Strabo

Written by David Smith

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Letters to Strabo

David Smith



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Matador
9 Priory Business Park,
Wistow Road, Kibworth Beauchamp,
Leicestershire. LE8 0RX
Tel: 0116 279 2299
Email: books@troubador.co.uk
Web: www.troubador.co.uk/matador
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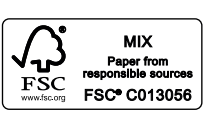
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Forget-me-not

STRABO was born at Amasia, or Amasijas, a town situated in the gorge of the mountains through which passes the river Iris, in Pontus […] He lived during the reign of Augustus and the earlier part of the reign of Tiberius.

Strabo was a great traveller and apparently had no professional or other occupation. We may therefore conclude that his father left him a good property. Much of his geographical information is the result of personal observation.

H C Hamilton, Esq., W Falconer, MA (Ed.): Preface to:
The Geography of Strabo

This book is a record of a pleasure trip […] I offer no apologies for any departures from the usual style of travel-writing that may be charged against me – for I think I have seen with impartial eyes, and I am sure I have written at least honestly, whether wisely or not.

Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*

I entrust this story of my own odyssey and the letters attached under seal to my three-year-old daughter. When she reaches twenty-eight, whether or not I've shuffled off this mortal coil, I ask that you pass it on to her. She alone must decide what on God's earth to do with it.

Adam Finnegan Black, *Mykonos, Greece, October 1982*

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PREFACE

The I–5 north near La Jolla, California, November 23, 1967

I remember the goddam rain was beating fearsome hard on our old Chevy that night. We were cruising well over eighty on the coastal highway back from San Diego. Like always, there was some sorta argument going between my ma and her scumbag boyfriend. He was all liquored-up and the car pitched alarmingly as we approached the La Jolla intersection.

I've a vivid memory of the tyres squealing as we rounded the corner. We lurched over the median. At that point, I buried my head in my hands so I could no longer see flashing lights bearing down on us. I heard the urgent blare of a truck horn. At the very last second, he swerved and we ran off the pavement, hurtling down a steep greasewood embankment, the brakes soon exhausted and defeated, pine branches splitting angrily against the windows. The windshield exploded and blood spattered drunkenly from his shattered brow; my ma screamed for me to keep down. We rolled on out of control for what seemed like forever. When we finally came to a halt at the bottom of a rocky culvert, I knew she was already dying, her chest crushed by the dash pad, her brow bleeding profusely. All I could do was stretch across from the back seat and hold her hand the best I could.

'Finn, promise me you'll find your father one day.'

'I promise, Ma.'

And that was it. She was gone. And my great orphan travelling life had begun, hardly auspiciously.

Mykonos, Greece, October 1982

So now you've started reading this, you've probably already realized it's a memoir of sorts. Yes OK, it's a travel story, but at its heart there's more. It's a story of a love that persevered with a passion that's hard even for me to put into words: of emotion and deep acts of devotion. So if you wish to read on, I'll start, but I'll quite understand if you don't. I'm not too proud to admit that a tear or two has been shed in its writing.

I should start with a few words about Strabo.

I guess I could blame that guy for this whole tragic history, or more accurately I could blame him for his *Geography*. Strabo was the ancient father of geography you see, and in a way he started it all for me. He was born two thousand years ago in Amasya, or Amasia, now part of modern-day Turkey, a region once stranded at the very easternmost bounds of civilization. He came from a wealthy family and was well educated. Somewhere along his life-journey he became the first real travel writer.

For my part, I was born twenty-eight years ago in La Jolla, California, a town that now passes I guess for the westernmost bounds of civilization or so some folks would like to think. I consider I've now done my bit for the travel genre, too.

Strabo lived during the *Pax Romana,* a golden age of prosperity ruled by great emperors. Our own golden age has also been one of the more prosperous periods the world has known, but one less well endowed with great emperors. Regrettably, we haven't learned much; it's hardly been a *Pax Americana*.

My full name is Adam Finnegan Black, but I go by Finn. Like Strabo, I'm now a seasoned, if not disillusioned, traveler with seemingly "no profession or other occupation".

The Greek word *Strabo* means 'cross-eyed' or 'one with a strabismus'. Adam on the other hand just means 'man'; and Finn – well, I guess Mark Twain has to take responsibility for that. To me that name now signifies the end of a journey, or *le fin.* And as for 'Black', well, I fear that all too well describes the recent temperament of my heart. But so be it.

Strabo had "apparently no profession or other occupation". Well, I'm an English major turned travel writer, so like him you might kindly describe me as a literary geographer. You may even have come across my inferior work. Fortunately, having enjoyed my fifteen minutes of fame, I've now regained the precious obscurity of my island cell.

In that case why then, you might rightly ask, have I decided to record this entire sad saga, years after the events it describes took place? Well, basically because it's time and until now I just couldn't stomach it. It's as simple as that. Time is everything… except a healer?

The point a boy comes of age and becomes a man is commonly figured to be his late teens or early twenties, but I'm not so sure. For me it came much earlier on that highway near La Jolla, although in a middle-class cosseted sort of way. And now at the grand old age of twenty-eight, I've lived a life and realize there's a second transition, the true accession of maturity. Twenty-eight ain't exactly old in any folk's book, but for me it's been an important milestone. Although part of me likes to think I'm still that youthful traveler and writer, in truth that guy's fading fast. The pain of experience has dealt roughly with naïve exuberance. I feel the regrets and cynicism of second age seeping into my bones. Likewise, I've come to realize I can't go on leaving things unsaid, staring at unexplained gaps in my timeline, gaps which truthfully hide an unrevealed part of my soul.

The tale I have to tell covers a period of great adventure in my life, beginning with that tragic loss of boyhood innocence in La Jolla and ending with this raw and princely exile on Mykonos. Rest assured though, it won't be maudlin and I intend to tell it honestly.

Along the way, I've had the fortune to meet many amazing folk, to call many of them friends and learnt a lot about the world from them; but one stands head and shoulders above the crowd. With the anniversary of her passing, I've been reminded of the special gifts she left me. I've rediscovered and reread the amazing letters she wrote. And I've realized that if I don't pay tribute to her memory now, I probably never will. The occasion of my daughter's third birthday seems a more than appropriate time to begin.

Growing up in California in the 1950s and '60s

If you've done the math, you'll work out I was born in '54. Kin-wise, I'm a mongrel: a Scotch-Irish-Indian mulatto, not such a lousy combination as it turns out. My natural parents met late in life. I suspect I was one of those 'accidents of passion'. In any case, I ended up their only child.

I reckon I must have got my traveling bug from my pa, Jerry. His was the Scotch-Irish part; stemming from old Pennsylvania stock. I've no idea where the writing thing came from though, except perhaps that my ma, Penny, was artistic. She was Native American, born into the Kumeyaay tribe in Baja. I can still see her in my daughter's dark probing eyes. She's always young and impossibly beautiful in my memory.

In early life, Jerry taught physics at Princeton. He first caught the mariner's curse during the War, serving on the

USS *Earle* as a radio operator. Injured at Salerno, he finished the war years on merchant ships. I've been told he was involved in the atom tests at Bikini.

Once demobbed, he settled in La Jolla and found work at the San Diego Oceanographic Institute. That's when he met my ma. He invented a special tank for calibrating deep-sea thermometers, taught and wrote scientific papers. However, he was never happy on land or very diligent as a family man. Having acquired the taste for salt water, he yearned for the sea. Every opportunity he got, he was off chasing trips and adventures.

He taught himself to scuba dive, still experimental at the time; that took him all over the world. He was often away for months on end. While he traveled, my long-suffering ma coped with the day-to-day chores. We were never well off but somehow got by. Fortunately, there was a whole clan of aunts and cousins to help out.

Jerry was diving in the Med when he went missing in '62. Ma had received a series of cheerful postcards from Athens and Rhodes but then he went off treasure-hunting on some wreck near Alexandria. He never surfaced from that last dive. Despite an extensive search there was no sign of him. They reckoned his body might've been carried off by a great white or something. So, there's a fine old tombstone in San Diego but no body inside. I was eight and can honestly hardly remember him. It might seem like an heroic way to die but it hit my ma hard. I can't say it did me much good either.

My ma was a wonderfully creative and industrious woman, always telling stories, full of enthusiasm for life. She spent her childhood in a remote *ejido* high in the mountains. They were dirt poor and as a teenager her kin crossed the border as illegals. Before she met Jerry, she worked as a weaver and embroiderer, building up her own little business

for tourists: tribal coiled baskets made from wild juncus. Her work was fine and delicate. She dyed the sharp-tipped reeds herself with black walnut and elderberry, incorporating all sorts of materials into her traditional patterns.

For a year after that diving accident, Jerry was officially classed as missing. There was no pension and my ma had to go back to weaving. She eventually got the court to pronounce him dead even if she didn't ever accept that fact herself. Amazingly, she also discovered there was a stash of family money in an account he hadn't touched. So our fortunes turned and overnight Ma became a wealthy and desirable widow. Unfortunately, that was just the start of a whole new set of troubles. She was still very attractive. I've got a studio photo of her in a silver frame. I like to think she was the spitting image of the film star Dolores del Río.

Predictably, the gold diggers descended. I really hated those times. It was like a whole swarm of locusts had turned up at our feast. I'd get home from class and find booze-hounds hanging, swigging tequila on the porch. I was just a young mulatto kid. How could I stop them from calling all times of night and day, eating our grub, drinking the house dry? My ma was far too good-natured and easy-going to ever say 'no'. Eventually she gave in completely. One of the more persistent guys moved in. I resented that mightily. What's more, he turned out to be a no-good sponger, always drunk and often violent. At least she never married him. She refused to believe Jerry was really dead.

Over the following four years I became increasingly unruly. I must've been a real pain, a whiny brat driving her to despair with adolescent self-pity. But still she loved me, till that dreadful night on that coastal highway when everything changed. Life kinda got real all of a sudden. It was my thirteenth birthday an' all.

Of course, only then did I find out my pa's inheritance had all but disappeared. My ma's boyfriend had invested her money in some speculative property scheme or other. I was parentless and practically penniless, a teenage orphan with uncertain prospects and no money apart from a meager college fund. I had to grow up real fast.

My teenage years – Ithaca and Meadville

And that's where my travelling life began. Fortunately, my pa's kin back east took pity on me and intervened. They took over legal responsibility. Although they weren't rich, they weren't poor either. So I was dragged away from sunny La Jolla to live in dreary Ithaca, NY. And I guess I'd probably still call it home today, if I hadn't escaped. Fortunately, as you'll hear, I voyaged a lot further than Ithaca and ended up on this Greek island paradise. But that's the story I have to tell.

Despite those teenage traumas, I began to study seriously. In fact, I quickly became the class nerd, a classic straight-A student. I guess I was never into sports, and too shy to bother much with chicks and stuff. So instead I read and dreamt and tripped out on music, visiting through song lyrics all the exotic locations my father had once explored.

In '72 I left high school with decent grades and got a place to study English at Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania – aka 'Tool City, USA' (on account of its world-class tool and die shops, not the folk that lived there). Believe me, if you know it today, I can assure you it was worse back then. Even the boomtown rats had given up on it; it was a sorry grid of one-storey houses, derelict factories and rusting boxcars. Apart from the college campus, the Talon

zipper works and Dad's Pet Food were the only two major employers. And outside of student sports, there was nothing much to keep us kids off the streets. With rosy tints, I guess both Meadville and Ithaca offered me some sort of sheltered oases during those sappy teenage years. I'm grateful for that, but I guess I didn't appreciate it much at the time.

Indeed, looking back, that whole period was kinda otherworldly, wedged between the horrors of Vietnam and Iran; progressive rock and mega-bands; naïve rebellion and sexual liberation (well, at least for the lucky dudes). Musically and culturally we were hanging on to the hippie scene, slowly being softened up for the shock of punk. It was a kinda mellow, timid sort of time. I guess middle-of-the-road was the phrase; overall, it wasn't a bad period to come of age, but it didn't prepare me much for what was to come.

* * *

Fair Allegheny, yonder on the hill… through all the years our hearts are turning still in love to thee…

Hell yes, I really *can* remember that corny college anthem. Allegheny was good for me. I came out of my shell at last. My eyes were opened to a whole new world but in a safe sort of way. I kinda got my mojo at last. The campus was an idyllic location. In the springtime, there were clear blue skies stippled with frothy cherry blossom. In the summer, it was beautiful but way too hot; there was baseball, chicks in hot pants and doobies passed round the lawn by Quigley. Even in the fall it was properly beautiful, if a heck cooler. That was my favorite time: summer leaves turning to eager red and gold. And then there was winter. Truthfully, for most of the time it was wet or windy or just plain cold, sometimes just butt-chilling cold.

We are Allegheny. We are family.

It was most certainly a place to meet new folk. When I'd left high school I was pretty innocent, still naïve about the word, unsophisticated and given to self-pity; but in those first few weeks I had my eyes opened. Allegheny was a human zoo cocooned in a Midwest Eden. OK, it wasn't California, but you could still find just about anything and anybody: long hair, facial hair, permed hair; checkered shirts, flares, acid tie-dyes; chicks that burned their bras, chicks that didn't; chicks that wore tight-fitting pants and tight-laced chicks that dressed just like their mommas. You could see it all, every day, anyway you liked. I felt like a southern desert flower flourishing at last after a rainstorm.

Rock and roll? Check. I was really into my music, then. We had vinyl, we had those new-fangled cassettes, and we even had live music. OK, so the Rolling Stones somehow missed us out of their world tour, but we did get Mountain 'Mississippi Queen', Arlo 'Alice's Restaurant' – twice (I still love that song) – and even The Boss. On my wall I have a framed program dated April 16, 1976 from that awesome gig.

Grub? Check. OK, it wasn't that sophisticated, but we didn't exactly go hungry; we always had the infamous Allegheny MLT (mutton-lettuce-tomato sub) to fend off total starvation. Beyond music and food there was the usual college stuff going on: the 'Gators football team, discotheques, and frat parties. There was pot, there was love, there was even forbidden love (apparently); there were good trips and there were bad trips; there was a library, lectures and seminars too. But truthfully, there wasn't a hell of a lot of learning going on. It was a liberal arts college, after all. Those of us who did wanna work had to pretend half the time that we didn't.

Love? Yeah. Free? No chance. Well not for wholesome ol' me, anyhow.

Before college I did have a teenage sweetheart of sorts – during the long hot summer after high school. She was gap-toothed with long curls that swung in the wind, and nicely rounded in all the right places: kinda John-boy stuff really. She smoked roll-ups and spat snuff but pretended to her folks she didn't. We used to sit for hours on the steps of her parents' porch with her mangy hound, chucking stones at the pickets, drinking hooch out of a Kool-Aid bottle, staring up at the deep blue-violet sky: me and Miss American Pie.

But we never got too serious – it was strictly first-base stuff. She was sure careful about that. And once at Allegheny, I didn't bother returning her letters no more. I soon had other distractions. I imagine she's probably a pillar of the community now, with her own gap-toothed kids and pets and ripped lawn-boys serving her lemonade an' all.

In my freshman year, I somehow acquired myself a real hot chick, admittedly with the bait of a beat-up ol' Ford my adoptive uncle had bought me. He was a pre-owned car guy. It was a piece of junk. She was a babe. An ex-Meadville High School cheerleader called 'Shaz', she was way too foxy for the likes of me: dyed-hair, plunging V-necks and a ripe chest full of gold. But what did I care? We hung out and cruised Park and Main. My buddies warned me it was never gonna last and they were right, but for the wrong reasons. I was way out of my depth. Tactlessly, I criticized her new hair perm one night; she bawled me out, and then gave me a real hard time for not listening. Did she chuck me right there and then? I can't remember. It's all kind of hazy now.

Not long after, she quit school and moved to the Big Apple. She got modelling work, now she's made it in the movies. It's weird to see her up there on the big screen and

think what might've been. I guess I was inconsolable for a day or two, but I got over it. After that experience, I mainly hung out with my beer buds, avoiding the evil lures of the female race. Yeah, OK, so we were delusional. Still, that don't mean I wasn't still interested in sex. That was different, if you know what I mean. There were other outlets for that obsession.

Graduation Day, Allegheny College, May 8, 1976

Finally, after four years of our oh-so-innocent lives, we staggered to the great day of our graduation: Commencement weekend in mid-May. It was '76, bicentennial year. I had a mighty crumby feeling in my gut that day, partly from uncertainty but mainly down to the cheap beer I'd consumed. It was a blast but we were trashed by the time we got to the formal bits, star-spangled banners an' all; a few guys torched stuff on stage in protest, we sat in the back row and made a real embarrassment of ourselves. Can you believe it?

Later that afternoon, hung-over, severely chastised by the dean and gathered for the last time on Bentley lawn, we all knew somehow it was the end of an era. It was a time to look out towards the world, time to move on from our cossetted alma mater. But at that moment I had more pressing worries. My trust fund had declined alarmingly and my adoptive family by then had their own money problems. I'd no ready-made job, no money to travel. I knew if I didn't earn some dough darned quick, I was gonna end up schlocking it sooner or later on Skid Row.

A bunch of my friends had planned a road trip to the Southwest in an old GM station wagon. They invited me along. God, I'd have loved to make that trip, especially with

where my kin came from an' all; but I couldn't afford it. I just didn't have the cash. In fact I hardly had two bits to rub together. So I waved them off jealously. They were free and happy, living the dream – the revered road trip – *Bound for Glory* with Woody Guthrie, *On the Road* with Jack Kerouac. Me, I was left behind in dullsville to sulk. I sold my junkyard of a car for a few bucks and stayed on free at the campus for as long as I could, trying to find something, anything, job-related in the city to earn a dime.

Soon I was getting real down. I spent long evenings in the local sports bar bussing tables, the only paying gig I could find. At the end of my shift, I'd spin out a single glass of beer and a fifty cents burger and fries, playing pool or watching the Olympics. I had no idea what on earth I was gonna do; an English major turned out to be no passport to anything. Good ol' Finn Black was heading fast up a blind alley. All I could do was hope and dream and conserve what little money I had.

Quite out of character, I started smoking and drinking, slowly killing myself, even though I couldn't really afford to, staring jealously at the young dudes with their cute girlfriends strolling past. I was sorely tempted to seek solace there, but dating was an even bigger risk. Gradually, I got into debt. I didn't starve but I was pretty well always hungry.

Then the epiphany came. My old English tutor turned up at the diner one night. That event probably saved my life. We got talking and for some reason I'll never be able to explain, he took on the task of provoking me to write. At first I was cautious, worried he might be hitting on me, but soon I realized he was for real. For some reason he thought I had talent. He said he believed in me, which felt darned good. *Carpe diem*. Yeah, one of those guys. You know the sort: "Every man is the author of his own life." As I said, he

probably saved my life that night, right then and there. He was a beautiful guy.

Inspired, I began to scribble down ideas on napkins as they came to me. Then I bought a notebook and scratched out pages of thick black ink late into the night. Most of it was dreamy nonsense: lovelorn verse and reworked song lyrics. But I was encouraged by: "O Captain! My Captain!" I wrote a couple of short articles and slushy poems for the local rag. Remarkably, one got accepted. All of a sudden I was a published writer.

Soon I was writing short stories on the porch in the sultry summer air. I had the bug. I'd begun to build a portfolio. My savior got me a job as a researcher in the college library. I signed up for his evening class on creative writing. I even got a short story published in *Writer's Digest*. I was on one helluva roll and not a reefer in sight.

I'd at last begun to build some real ambition. I had some direction. And then a new idea began to form, burning and bright in my mind. I had on my mind my ma's words in that canyon a decade earlier. A mission, it went straight to my head and I blew it up into this grand plan, my own bohemian rhapsody.

For years, I'd been dreaming of traveling like my pa, pouring over atlases and travel books in my room; but suddenly I had focus and motivation. For my ma's sake, I was gonna find out what happened to him for real; and along the way I dreamed I'd become the next great American travel writer. I could scratch out articles, poetry, travelogs, whatever was needed to pay my way. Of course it was fantasy, but once bitten, I could see no limit – a new Mark Twain, a new Hemingway, a new (white) hope for Meadville: today Allegheny, tomorrow the world. It was hopelessly naïve, yes, but still kinda cool.

But before any of that could happen, I still needed to earn some real cash; a ticket to Europe wasn't cheap. And I had other needs too. By that time, my interest in the fairer sex (aka obsession) was going through a sea change, prompted by someone I'd met. I'd begun to get more fussed about my appearance; the duds I wore got smarter. I was desperate to lose that burdensome status, the one thing most guys end up worrying about and for some reason girls never seem to miss. You know what I mean? A virgin travel writer, now that would never do, would it?

The job in the library had proved an unexpected boon. There was this incredibly cute chick working as a cleaner there. I found an excuse to chat and she seemed real nice. More importantly she wasn't seeing anyone. In the hours between my various jobs, I started reading there a lot. Her parents were Polish Jews, evacuees from the war. They worked in one of the Meadville machine shops. They kept themselves to themselves but were decent, god-fearing folk. I sensed the door of opportunity had opened.

Zofia (not her real name) smelled of cheap scent and apple shampoo and was real happy to chill. She was cute but kinda vain, always looking at her face in mirrors, adjusting her lipstick. She had a huge crush on some film star and for some reason thought I looked a bit like him. Well, I could dream, couldn't I? I bought her a cheap steak in the diner. After that, things began to move along real nice. We fooled around at the fairground. Soon I was on a homerun, sneaking up the drainpipe outside her bedroom after dusk. Under her covers, we got round to doing something more about love too. Her parents would have died if they'd known.

But after a few weeks, some East Coast cheese-weasel showed up in an Audi. I was suddenly toast, yesterday's news. She moved on to the Promised Land and I was just another

Stingo pole-axed by his Midwest whore. The saving grace in retrospect was that it forced me back to concentrating on my travel plans.

I researched how famous travel writers made their first journeys for a series of articles. It fascinated me how they all took something worthwhile out of that first experience on the road, whether they later became writers, journalists or even philosophers. It opened my eyes to all sorts of new possibilities. I wanted that life. I wanted to get going, to write and make my fortune. Find out what had really happened to my pa and maybe find a bit more of that mythical free love I'd been missing, too.

And I wasn't the only dude thinking that way: there were plenty more guys looking to play the same gig and plenty of places to go. Some were venturing as far as Persia or India, but Europe seemed to be the popular destination. That fitted, as the last three places my pa had been were Athens, Rhodes and Alexandria. My tentative plan was to get there via the tourist sites of the old world, set it all down on paper and make a few bucks from articles along the way.

I know some writers have made a big deal about traveling and their great search for something – peace, revelation, comradeship. But for me it was more like the line from that Hendrix song: "All I'm gonna do is just go and do what I feel. If I'm free, it's because I'm always running."

That's before I discovered Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. Even after fifty years, it's still amazing. The book tells of the son of a Brahmin priest. He rejects his priestly destiny and decides instead to track down the real essence of life. It's a wild trip. Through his journey, he achieves enlightenment as he seeks answers to life's deepest questions. The name Siddhartha means 'he who has attained his goals' in Sanskrit. For a while the book became my Bible:

Siddhartha does nothing; he waits, he thinks, he fasts, but he goes through the affairs of the world like the stone through water, without doing anything, without bestirring himself; everyone can reach his goal, if he can think, wait and fast.

So, armed with a new taste for philosophy, I set about raising funds for my trip with conviction. In the evenings, I took extra shifts in the diner. Then I got a second major break: the unexpected offer of a summer school teaching post on an exchange program with paid travel each way to Europe. It looked like a godsend. I grabbed the bull by the horns, so to speak, and went for it. At last I was on my way and rolling, like a stone through water.

BOOK I

THE DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF GEOGRAPHY

Geography unfolds to us the celestial phenomena, acquaints us with the occupants of the land and ocean, and the vegetation, fruits, and peculiarities of the various quarters of the earth, a knowledge of which marks him who cultivates it as a man earnest in the great problems of life and happiness.

Strabo, *Geography, Book 1, Chapter 1*

For months the great pleasure excursion to Europe and the Holy Land was chatted about in the newspapers everywhere in America and discussed at countless firesides…

Excursion to the Holy Land, Egypt, The Crimea, Greece and Intermediate Points of Interest, Brooklyn, 1 February 1867

What was there lacking about that program to make it perfectly irresistible?

Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*

But before we go anywhere near Europe I have a crucial side trip to recount. I'm still not exactly sure what led me to Olana that day in April '77. But I thank my lucky stars whatever it was.

You may already know that Olana was the historic home of the nineteenth-century traveler and landscape painter, Frederic Edwin Church. His amazing orientalist confection stands on a bluff above the Hudson. It's a perfect, peaceful but otherworldly place.

During the winter of '76/'77, I'd started reading Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad,* getting more ideas for what I'd do in Europe. That led me to discover a largely forgotten writer called Grace King. She's a noble and remarkable lady who in turn provided me with the link to Olana and therefore to the great geographer Strabo himself. If that all sounds convoluted, I guess it was, but I'm mighty glad of it all the same.

OK, so you've never heard of Grace King? Shucks, that's a real shame. She was truly an amazing woman. Born just before the Civil War, she was Louisiana-bred, an author and historian. She wrote passionately about privilege and oppression in the South, a whole century before Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks. She also took on the male world of publishing and somehow succeeded. That's how she got to know Samuel Langhorne Clemens (or Mark Twain, as we know him). She wrote it all up in her brilliant autobiography: *Memories of a Southern Woman of Letters.*

Grace was, in her own way, a radical: an early feminist. But when I read her memoir that spring, the thing that really caught my eye was a remarkable account of the visit she made to Hartford in 1887, where she met the Clemens family. More precisely, a side trip she made with them to visit Fred Church at his fabulous home in the Catskills.

* * *

'Evelyn's up in the studio, she's expecting you,' growled the silver-haired docent at the entrance. I was dressed smartly in a collared-shirt, (pressed) chinos and new sneakers, but probably still looked a wreck as I'd journeyed overnight by Greyhound from Meadville. I passed the docent's desk; she maintained her stern look. I could tell she didn't like me one bit. She was probably right to be cautious, but I remember it really hacked me off. I'd paid good money to have those darned chinos pressed too.

Having got past the Medusa, I made my way up to the fabulous Court Hall. I had to pause for a second to take it in. The room was amazing, decorated strikingly in eastern-style with stencilled borders and a pale sky-blue ceiling. But it was the menagerie of artefacts that took my breath away. Like a haphazard bygones shop. I didn't dawdle for long, though. I didn't want to be late. I had an appointment with the archivist called Evelyn and I'd never met anyone called Evelyn before. I dutifully followed the neat gold-painted cedar-wood signs and made my way expectantly towards the Studio Wing.

I should add for context that I have a reputed kin connection with the Churches on my pa's side. I'd therefore seen Olana in photographs many times and read about it in books, but that was the first time I'd ever made it in person. Photographs just don't do it justice. In the flesh it's something else. It's wackeyville, a crazy blow-out to the senses.

However, I was in for an even bigger shock. Evelyn, the archivist, whose name up to then had been no more than an intriguing monogram at the end of formal sounding letters, turned out to be my literal epiphany.

I can remember every detail of the first moment I met her. What I saw, what I heard, what I smelled. When I entered the studio, she was standing with her back towards me, leaning on a parapet, looking out wistfully towards the Catskills. Her tall figure was wrapped in a flowing cotton dress, the light from the windows spilling around her like a halo. It seemed she was radiating halleluiah glory. She was a picture of womanhood, everything I'd ever desired and more.

I was transfixed. Unaware of my approach, she'd turned to look at some birds in flight and her face was lit up in profile, like in one of those Italian annunciations. You probably think that I'm making this up, don't you? I kid you not. First impressions are everything, aren't they? And if you hadn't already guessed, I'd fallen immediately and hopelessly in love with that girl. Goddam, it felt like something apocalyptic was happening in my gut.

A clock struck the hour. I was jolted from my trance. She turned and her face was revealed in its full glory. It didn't disappoint. Jeez, she was so pretty, her skin all fresh and glowing. But there was something sad too about her expression, something lonesome.

However, as soon as she saw me she broke into a polite smile. Her watery grey eyes lit up, sparkling and bright with intelligence; berry lips framed almost perfectly defined teeth. She'd tied her long auburn hair back formally with a tortoiseshell comb and set it off with pretty shellac earrings. She was just a dream. I couldn't stop staring.

But I was already calculating nervously. There was no ring. I figured she was maybe a couple of years older than me, but not so much as to be out of reach. Stunned, I was hardly able to speak. She looked at me questioningly and brushed a loose reddish tress of hair from her eyes. Unlike most women I'd ever known, she appeared to be wearing

little or no make-up; in fact her features seemed completely natural. That smile climbed all over her face. She certainly didn't need paint. She was just a very classy dame.

'You must be Adam,' she said gently, approaching to shake my hand. I nodded and mumbled a feeble acknowledgement. As she came near, I was assailed head-on by the scent of her fragrance; it was heady and fresh and seemed to suck my senses out of the room. She was a little taller than me, long-boned, and walked with the gait of one conscious of those facts. I took her hand briefly but still failed to speak.

'Here's the book you wrote me about,' she said, ignoring my hesitance and diving straight into business without any moment of small talk. She handed me a leather-bound volume that was resting on a small round writing table. I relaxed just a little. Her sweet voice was soft and reassuring with a slight southern drawl, like the best honey, the stuff the bees hang on to till last. I noticed the way she held her head slightly at an angle as she spoke, as if waiting to hear an answer, like I was the only person in the world that mattered. I thanked her but remained frozen to the spot.

She paused and indicated I should sit down in one of a pair of carved buttoned armchairs. As I sat nervously, she took the other herself, opening the book at the first page and pointing out a hand-written inscription: *"Christmas 1879, to my dearest Frederic."*

I was conscious that I was acting like a dork. I was really uneasy in the presence of someone so gorgeous. She began to look at me quizzically and I realized I'd better say something sensible quick. With supreme effort, I gulped to draw breath.

But again, 'Thank you!' was all I could manage, adding: *Lord if she's the one, thank you* silently to myself in a kind of drunken prayer.

The book was undoubtedly the one Grace King had referred to in her memoir. But it was the sight of her, not the book that thrilled me. I was staring at her like a glue-eyed turkey. She frowned. I could tell she was embarrassed. I broke my gaze and took the book from her. Of course, like a dope, I nearly dropped it, but she saved my blushes by holding on. Our hands crossed briefly. I noticed a small heart-shaped locket hanging from thin filigree around her neck as she leaned forward. I already envied its intimacy with the provocative curvature of her pale translucent flesh.

Damn, I wondered anxiously*, is that a present from her guy or some family piece?*

Without speaking, I leafed hurriedly through the pages, not really paying them much attention before closing it again. Then I inspected the red Moroccan binding with simulated expertise, like I was some connoisseur or something. I reopened the book and turned back to the title page. She waited patiently for me to speak. During that display of feigned scholarship, I continuously took sly glances at her. She had good skin, if pale and heavily freckled, with a luminous quality, like rice paper glazed with oil. Throughout, she remained attentive if expressionless.

'It's the first 1854 Hamilton edition, the first English translation of Strabo,' she offered at last, to break the silence.

'Yes, we have an older Latin translation at Allegheny, but the inscription on this one makes it special!' I replied, still reading the pencil margin notes.

Goddamit, I must have sounded like a dork. I can't imagine what academic authority I portrayed with those sublime words. But having at least established some minimal credentials, I set about getting her talking. As it turned out, that didn't prove too difficult.

'Well, good, I'm awful glad of that,' she replied smoothly, studying me again with those deep grey eyes. I'm quite sure my mind was stripped transparent to her in its total inadequacy. 'I'd be so glad if I can help you with your research,' she added. 'You know of course the significance of the book to Olana?' she asked.

I nodded. Grace King had recorded that fact. She smiled, seemingly expecting me to say more. There was a shimmer of knowledge and slight superiority in her expression. Had she found me out that easily?

'Yeah, I've read the story,' I replied dumbly.

She smiled again but this time those eyes hardened and really nailed me. From her stern expression I wasn't sure if she disliked or just plain pitied me. But then as our eyes met she flushed a little and dropped her gaze. That immediately gave me some hope.

She recovered her poise quickly though and proceeded to pour us coffee from a silver pot, pulling a cotton-lace shawl closer around her shoulders as she did so. I noticed the way she placed her palms very precisely on her knees. The clocks in the room mocked my nervous heart as a cloud caused the light to dim for a moment. Undeterred, I decided to blag it out. But it was still fair Evelyn who made the running.

'Now Adam, you said in your letter that you're real interested in Grace King and Sam Clemens and their visit to Olana. I've taken the liberty of collecting a few things together, some letters and photographs. But maybe I should start with the occasion of their visit?' Her speech had the assuredness of southern nobility, her vocabulary the superiority of good breeding. It unnerved me even more.

'Yes please…I'd…I'd be real grateful, err, for my research of course,' I stammered. 'But please call me Finn; I don't much use my given name.'

'Finn! Well how odd, I used to have a dog called Finn!' she laughed unguardedly. My heart sank. That wasn't good. I mean to be compared to a dog? 'Well…it's a nice name I mean,' she added apologetically.

'And a cat called Telemachus, like Carole King?' I joked, seeing if I could tease out some personal details from her.

'No, but I sure love that album,' she replied obligingly, laughing. She relaxed too. 'So it's Adam aka Finn. Then I guess you might as well call me Eve,' she added ironically. I mean I think that was some kind of joke. The temptation to lean over and kiss her huckleberry lips was becoming unbearable.

Of course, I'd come across some mighty stunning (and therefore unattainable) women at college, but I'd never been so close to a peach like her. All sorts of thoughts were going through my head. I think I could've stayed there, like some motionless Rip Van Winkle, content to the last hours of my life, if she hadn't intervened. I was happy just to watch her hair fluttering in the wind, to follow the slight creases playing in her skin. I pinched myself and tried desperately to behave like the serious academic I purported to be.

'OK, Finn, shall we start?' she asked, her manner brusque and businesslike again.

'Yes,' I squeaked and nodded. Thank God, she at least was holding it together.

'Well, then. From his correspondence with Mr Church, we know that Sam Clemens visited Olana for the first time in June 1887. There were eight in the party: the Clemenses, their two eldest daughters Susy and Clara, a clergyman called Joseph Twichell – in fact the minister who'd married Sam and his wife Olivia – the Hartford editor Mr Charles Dudley Warner, his wife Susan, and of course the newly published Miss Grace King.'

'Quite a crowd!' I cracked. That was better Finn. *Go boy*.

'Yes, they traveled up from Hartford by train, through what Grace described in her journal as "delightful country". On reaching Hudson, they hired three traps to drive the rest of the way up here, arriving in the late afternoon. In those days, the road twisted through miles of uninhabited forest till it emerged into the main courtyard. Then, for the first time, they would have seen the whole property properly: "Orlana" as Grace called it.' Eve showed me a passage in one of Grace's letters:

"Heavens! And all this has been in this world so long & I have never seen it before!"

She smiled and got up from her chair, walking over to a series of photos she'd laid out. Her every movement seemed poised, serene even. I followed her wordlessly to the table and scanned the photos. My unholy desire for her was building with every minute in her presence.

As I approached, I felt my arm brush against the blue cotton of her skirt. I was immediately rewarded with the sharp impression of her hips. The touch was electrifying; however, with uncharacteristic sensitivity, I withdrew, in case she thought the contact deliberate. But if she had, she didn't object and neither did she move away. Instead, she continued to speak calmly and precisely, seemingly intent on imparting the full benefit of her knowledge. I was feeling mildly encouraged; her perfume was just intoxicating.

'Grace recorded in her journal that they were "greeted cordially on arrival" by Mr Church,' she said. 'Look, here's a photo of him with Isabel and their daughter. Her daughter's name was also Isabel, so to avoid confusion she was known as Downie.

'When this was taken, she'd recently become engaged to Jeremiah Sullivan Black Jr., the son of Chauncey

Forward Black, Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania and grandson of Jeremiah S. Black, the former Secretary of State and Attorney-General,' she added, pointing to a bearded senatorial looking man.

'Jerry Black!' I exclaimed.

'Yes, perhaps that ancestor of yours,' she replied. 'The engaged couple were very young and Jerry had to give up his degree at Yale to marry her. The Churches' eldest son Freddie was away at Princeton at that time; he wasn't a very conscientious student. Theodore and Louis, their other two sons, were also off camping in the Catskills. Here's a picture of the three boys.'

She paused, waiting for a further question. But I had none and nodded meekly for her to continue, slyly looking for an opportunity for some further physical contact.

'Mr Church was of course America's most famous painter, a charming and civilized man,' she continued. 'However, he was ageing and increasingly forced by arthritis to spend winters away from Olana. His wife, the heiress Isabel Carnes, was known as a marvellous hostess. Here she is, captured by Alfred Sisley just after they married. She was described as having "soft curling golden hair, and a sweet face where the colour comes and goes every moment."'

I was already daydreaming about how Eve would make a fabulous artist's muse too, maybe even a traveling companion for an aspiring writer? I could have drunk from her bluegrass voice all day long.

I deliberately let my wrist rest against her forearm as we pored over the photographs. But again, it didn't seem to bother her. She was a class act, revealing nothing. I was literally shaking with the electricity moving between us, but I still couldn't tell if she felt the same. I looked again into those liquid grey eyes, trying to attract further contact. She

obliged briefly before turning back to another book. I caught a glimpse of a question that remained unanswered on her brow.

'In her memoir, Grace wrote that the family spent an inordinate amount of time staring out of the windows,' she said.

'Who could blame them?' I added, pretending to look at the view while trying to get closer. I was thinking hard about Eve's situation. What was such an attractive and intelligent woman doing in that remote place, miles from youthful civilization. Was she lonely? Was there anyone in her life? Who'd given her that locket? I longed to take her in my arms, but suddenly my thoughts were broken by a sudden change in the tone of her voice.

'Not everyone thinks like that. Unbelievably, they want to build a nuclear power plant over there,' she said severely, obviously upset. She was pointing way downstream. The steel in her voice took me by surprise. 'We're gonna submit *View from Olana in the Snow* as our evidence to the public enquiry. That should darned well make them sit up and think.'

Wow, what had brought that on? I wondered. The severity of her voice was really quite extraordinary.

She stared at me intensely as she pointed to a painting hanging on the wall, challenging me to disagree. I wouldn't have dared to.

'Terrible,' I said, swallowing hard. 'How could they?'

I was barely interested in politics or all that anti-nuclear stuff, but sensing her passion, I saw my chance. 'Nukes are the pits,' I added in empathy. It was feeble but at least well received. I thought I saw her guard drop, curiosity creeping into her eyes? But she wasn't giving much away. She indicated instead for me to follow her and we returned to the Court Hall.

From there, we climbed the main stairs to the next landing. As I followed, I tried hard to keep my eyes off her body, but failed miserably. She moved with such composure, her limbs uninhibited within her dress. I wondered if she knew what she did to weak-willed guys like me.

When we reached the landing, she seemed to have got over her earlier stridency. We entered one of the guest rooms. It was arranged as it would have been a century earlier: heavy Japanese paper on the walls, a dark wooden bed with embroidered coverlet and fireplace with blue and white tiles. One of the windows was covered with an amber screen to keep out the bright light from the south; the other looked out west through patterned brick arches across to the hills. I could hear a songbird outside. It put me in mind of that track from *Rumours* by Fleetwood Mac and unconsciously I began to hum the tune. Unfazed, Eve continued her honeyed tourist spiel.

'Grace stayed in this very bedroom, the Ombra Room. It's located directly above the Ombra Balcony downstairs.' She looked at me and I nodded. She'd switched back into docent mode, which wasn't at all what I longed for at that moment.

'Grace wrote that she unpacked as quickly as possible then joined the others for dinner. She felt unable to stay in bed that first night, afraid to miss even a moment of the experience. She described how she gazed for an hour or more at the Catskills, watching the Hudson winding past in the moonlight; probably sat in this very rocking chair taking in the cool mountain air. We're nearly seven hundred feet above the river here.'

I walked over to admire the new perspective, getting as close to her as I decently could. Her scent was really playing tricks on my mind. I knew I needed her in my life.

In the distance, the river wound lazily in and out of its hilly shoulders towards a lake-like broadening, glinting in the sun. I pointed to it, deliberately brushing against her hair as I did. It felt soft to the touch, like braided chiffon, like an angel's hair. She noticed the contact though, and looked at me in surprise, before calmly smoothing the offending tress back behind her ear. I think at that point she must have realized I was hitting on her. But if she was upset she didn't show it. It was a crude play, but no verbal warning had been forthcoming. She went on calmly to explain that a hundred years earlier that stretch of river was known as Clover Reach.

'There would have been sailboats working the river; just like that one,' she whispered and pointed towards a small white triangle disappearing behind the trees. I could hear the country girl in her voice. We watched as the boat drifted along the river, the mountains brooding like great titans in the sky. An idea came into my mind and I asked her about the architect, pointing to the colored bricks that formed the little balcony.

'It looks like an artist's work,' I said.

'Yes, the house was designed by Mr Calvert Vaux, co-designer of Central Park, to Mr Church's precise specification,' she explained. Her voice signalled she was back on firmer footing. 'After he returned from the Middle East, Mr Church completely changed his plans for the house. He axed his previous architect and hired Mr Vaux. Together, they came up with this lavish imitation of a Moorish castle, the likes of which had never been seen in America before.'

Eve seemed to have run out of things to say about the bedroom. She paused to allow me a further question, one which I was certain must be on the tip of my tongue. However, it wouldn't emerge, so we left the bedroom in awkward silence.

I wondered what it was that kept her there. She was intelligent, assured and gorgeous. She'd be a catch for any man in his right mind. She'd clearly accumulated a huge amount of knowledge about the place and seemed to have a genuine affection for it, but at the same time there was far more to her than dry academic talent. *She should be in one of those Manhattan museums, not in this remote place,* I thought. In turn, I began to wonder what she thought I was doing there, given my obvious inability to ask a single intelligent question.

'The other bedrooms are also finely decorated,' she continued. 'This floor is actually quite conventional for a country house of the time. It was downstairs that Mr Church went to town with his vision. The first floor rooms are arranged in an Eastern Cross; they were filled with plants, just as today. Isabel was fascinated by the desert tent life they'd experienced in the Levant, so it's designed to give you the impression the rooms are half indoors and half outdoors; each with its own stunning views. Shall we go back down?'

'Yes,' I nodded. But it was hard to stop my mind running away with imagining what it'd be like to spend time alone with her in that bedroom. Think me shallow, but I'd have loved to while away the rest of that afternoon in extracurricular research, so to speak. I was awful glad she couldn't read my thoughts in the way she was next reading from a card on the wall.

'This describes a house Isabel saw in Damascus: "Walls & ceilings were gorgeously decorated, and mirrors everywhere – inlaid with ivory and mother of pearl – by candlelight, the effect must be quite splendid – One is reminded of the Arabian nights tales."'

The Arabian Nights: yes that was it; me and Scheherazade in the Ombra bedroom, cool and shaded and possibly

coupling…. But of course, that wasn't gonna happen. We walked back down the staircase towards the Court Hall. As we descended, I watched the way the light shone through amber glass, picking out the subtle coloring in her hair. I inhaled again. That scent of wild flowers was as fresh as if she'd pressed it in the morning dew. It was driving me crazy. I was shaking with desire. Distracted, I stumbled on the last riser. She grabbed me. Suddenly, our cheeks were almost touching. Her fingers pressed into my flesh. But the moment lasted barely an instant.

'Are you OK?' she asked removing her hand immediately, obviously embarrassed by the contact. I shook my head. 'Then, do you need a rest?' she added.

'No, I'm just dandy,' I replied. Actually I was just buzzing.

'We should get some air though. The grounds are lovely this time of year. We'll just take a quick look round the Sitting Room and then we can go outside.'

'OK,' I muttered in selfish rapture.

As we walked through the hall, I looked round at the olive and salmon walls and the jumble of painted tables and chairs. There were Shaker rockers, Persian metalwork, bronzes, native uniforms, South American birds, Turkish rugs and all manner of exotic diversity. It was mad, truly mad, and wilder than a woodchuck. I'd never seen anything like it, even in a museum.

'Where on earth did he get all this stuff?' I asked.

'Oh, but that's the beauty of it. Everywhere!' she gasped. 'It's a complete record of his travels. He was a compulsive collector, a magpie! He had his agent crate it all and ship it back as they went,' she added enthusiastically.

'Crazy,' I said.

'So Finn, what else can I tell you about?' she asked. I

thought about that for a second and then fortunately an idea came into my head.

'You know, I've been reading about Mark Twain, err Sam Clemens, but I don't know much at all about the rest of the family. Olivia, for instance?'

'Sure. Well, Olivia Langdon was a great beauty you know, the very essence of an ideal Victorian wife. In Grace's memoirs she wrote that Olivia was her confidante for over forty years. She had lovely dark brown hair, an angelic smile and was known by friends and kin simply as Livy.'

'And their two daughters?' I asked. She frowned. Suddenly I noticed something of a shadow slip across her face, as if she'd wished I hadn't asked that question.

'I've had to do a bit of research on them myself. I'm afraid it's not such a happy story,' she replied, 'they also had a son, who died young of diphtheria,' she added and then hesitated.

'But I'd be very interested in knowing more,' I added. 'If you don't mind, that is?'

'Of course not. Well, there were actually three daughters including Jean, the youngest. Grace had befriended Susy and Clara during her stay in Hartford. Susy was a delicate blonde beauty, fiercely smart and intense. She'd just embarked on an ambitious plan to write her father's biography. She was a great lover of the stage, a perfect mimic of Sarah Bernhardt.'

'And Clara?'

'She was the natural musician. Although only sixteen, she'd insisted on taking the trip. She was known as "the sassmill" by her father, on account of her frequent rebellions. But Sam seemed more than happy to indulge both of them. He took endless delight in his daughters, whatever their foibles.'

'I hadn't realized he was so blessed with female company!'

'Blessed or blighted?' she asked and then laughed.

'Blessed,' I replied firmly. 'And Jean?'

'Poor ol' Jean. She was too young to make the trip. She was apparently a kind-hearted person, particularly fond of animals. Unfortunately, she was diagnosed later in life with chronic epilepsy. She suffered greatly and spent several years in sanatoriums, much to Sam Clemens's later regret. It killed her eventually.'

'Oh, God,' I replied, but less than fully sympathetically. Eve looked at me oddly and then took a copy of one of Mark Twain's books from the bookshelf and read out the dedication: "To those good-mannered and agreeable children Susie and Clara Clemens this book is affectionately inscribed by their father."

I was surprised to see a tear welling in the corner of her eye. It was almost the first sign of emotion she'd shown apart from the nuclear incident.

'So, it didn't all end happily ever after?'

'No, by the time Sam Clemens died, they were all gone except Clara,' she replied a bit choked. She was clearly bothered.

'She outlived them all?'

'By over fifty years, the stubborn survivor. I guess they were all quite different. She died in La Jolla in 1962. They say Susy was made of mind and Clara of matter.'

The tear was now rolling down her cheek.

'Look, we can change the subject if you want?' I volunteered anxiously. Of course I'd clocked the La Jolla reference. The same year my pa died. Clara was definitely someone worth finding out more about.

'No, no. It's just such a sad story,' she said hurriedly and wiped the tear away self-consciously. 'Unfortunately, that period was the calm before the storm. Very soon afterwards,

Mr Clemens was forced to declare bankruptcy because of poor investments. His fortunes never recovered. The last decade or so of his life was beset with family tragedies.' She turned away from me. I figured I saw a second tear on her cheek. She went over to stand by the fireplace. After a moment, having collected herself, she pointed up at a magnificent salmon-pink tinted picture above the mantle.

'Look, this is my favorite. Painted from sketches Mr Church made when he visited Petra,' she said. The image was of the famous treasury, El Khasné, glanced through the Siq.

'It's wonderful,' I replied. 'He traveled very widely, didn't he?'

'Yes. He's supposedly the source of the famous Twain quote: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness,"' she replied. 'Early in his career, he was influenced by the German naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt. He encouraged painters to travel to those parts of the world with the greatest botanical diversity. His first journey was to South America in 1853, when he was twenty-seven, an attempt to retrace Humboldt's route from Barranquilla to Guayaquil in Ecuador, right through the northern Andes. He made hundreds of sketches of rivers, waterfalls and volcanoes and used them extensively in his later studio paintings.'

'Did Isabel travel with him, too?'

'Well, later, after they were married. I guess her gift to him of Strabo's *Geography* reveals how important travel was to both of them. The English translation had made Strabo's work accessible for the first time. Like Church, he'd traveled extensively to form his knowledge of the world and its peoples and customs. And as you know, the name Olana itself is derived from *Olane*, which Strabo described as "one

of the treasure-storehouse on the Araxes River, with a view both of a fertile valley and of Mount Ararat where Noah's Ark is said to have come to rest."'

'I've been reading Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* recently,' I replied. 'Were the Churches and Sam Clemens in the Holy Land at the same time?'

'Not quite. Sam returned from his tour in November 1867. The Churches left New York about the same date, visited Paris and London at the turn of the year, then arrived in Alexandria in January. After that they made a prolonged tour of the Holy Land and Europe, returning the following year.'

'Ships in the night!' I joked.

'By a matter of weeks,' she replied.

Before we left the house she took a card of Olana from the gift shop and wrote on it in magenta ink: "This has been an ideal holiday in a Garden of Eden, without the Garden of Eden's unprotection from winter!"

'Something to remember us by; Sam's own words,' she said.

'I'll treasure it,' I replied. She still had no idea how much I would.

Picnic Point, later that afternoon

We left the house behind us and strolled into the grounds. There'd been a brief rain shower but she beckoned me to follow and we strode purposefully through the wet grass towards the lake. Beneath our feet the first green blush of spring basked in the sun. The hint of a rainbow was playing in her hair. It felt like *we* were walking in the Garden of Eden, *too*.

'I love it out here, it's the best part of my job,' she said.

The spring sun was warm and bright as we walked down the South Road. When we reached the lake, we proceeded round to the southeast, chatting freely. She seemed happier outdoors, and almost skipped through the grass. I asked her about her past training and future ambitions. She began to open up at last.

She told me she was an honors graduate – *summa cum laude* an' all that. I was impressed. She'd worked as an archivist at Olana for two years, but long-term wanted to do voluntary work overseas. She roomed in a cottage in the grounds, but it was lonesome, she said, and she was planning to move out to a house in Hudson soon. A girlfriend of hers was an antiques trader there.

She became more reticent when I tried to tap her about her love life, skilfully diverting my attempts at discovery. I couldn't read whether she was just being coy or had no interest in the subject; there was no outward sign of a partner, apart maybe from that locket. It couldn't be too ardent a relationship, could it, with her living such a distance out of town?

As we walked, the house was revealed every so often, majestic behind the winter canopy. The sun had created a spectrum of reflected color on the lake, broken by the thinnest gauze of blue-green algae. We soon reached the furthest point and looked back. It was a gorgeous spot.

'This place is called Picnic Point,' she said. 'The family used to swim here.'

'Lovely,' I said.

'Yes, I hear the water's very refreshing!' She grinned and looked at me inquisitively. *Was she serious?* I wondered.

'Won't somebody mind?' I asked.

'Of course not,' she replied and looked away. What could

I lose? I stripped down to my shorts and dived into the water. Of course, I was dying for her to join me and waved hopefully.

'You've gotta be joking. It's far too cold,' she shouted laughing.

'Sure, but I could always warm you up?' I muttered quietly.

The lake water was truly freezing. I found out later that she did often swim there, but only in the summer, after the crowds had left. She wasn't remotely tempted to follow me on that occasion. Goddam, if only she had, maybe things might have turned out differently?

After I'd swum a few minutes I returned to the pier and she passed me a towel. We chatted for a while, but the air had started to cool and I began to shiver. I pulled on my shirt and pants. We returned to the house with the terracotta sky descending on us. The glow was so intense it appeared to swallow whole the deep colors of the walls. It'd begun to rain and we ran the last few yards, before ascending the bell tower. I knew I'd already missed the last bus and it would be a long walk to the nearest town, but I was real glad I'd stayed. I won't try to describe the sunset to you, but it felt as though we ought to be staring at it on our knees it was so intense.

So that was how I met Eve. Looking back, that day was near perfect. I'd met the girl of my dreams and that day was also the final catalyst for me to turn my dreams of travel into reality. Eve, Olana and the contents of the house had truly inspired me, opening up my mind to the possibilities of travel. If Fred Church and Sam Clemens could tour Europe and the Middle East a hundred years ago, what was *I* waiting for?