

Chapter 2 of *Borderlands USA*

The anniversary of September 11th dawned crisp and clear, much like the original, with a fall ripeness in the air. Perfect weather for flying into tall objects.

The wind gusts were so strong, however, they kicked up funeral dust from the Ground Zero construction site and beat white caps up the Hudson River as far north as the George Washington bridge at 179th Street. In Central Park limbs were torn from usually well-trimmed trees and one large oak had come tumbling down, spread-eagle in the grass. Even after nightfall the wind remained a force, snuffing out many candles during the candlelit memorial service on the Great Lawn, despite repeated attempts at relighting, words left unexpressed.

I had been out of the country during the attacks, feeling useless and unable to help. In the immediate aftermath, distance defeated me and I felt frustrated: how could I show my support? So I flew back home that Thanksgiving and visited New York the prior week, spending one night with three different friends to see if they were okay.

That helped somewhat, yet emotionally I still needed to grieve, in person and publicly, to witness the slow healing of the country's wounds. Hence, my determination to trip-start on the anniversary. We, as a nation, do public grieving all too well, and that quiet, blustery day in New York City was no exception. So my madcap rush had been worth it, for I felt a tad wholer than before.

When I drove north from Manhattan up the glorious if elusive wave-carved coast, I sensed a similar wind to my back, blowing the car towards sights seen and unseen. Leaving New York, I realized there's nothing like being close to home to blind you to the familiar. For I have beat the path between New York and Boston so many times that I could on my own dirt-smooth Indian trail find the way on a moonless, starless night, entirely by feel. How, then, to make the familiar unfamiliar and the known unknown? How to make the world afresh?

My roundabout solution was to take the least direct path possible,

for full circumnavigation of the American continent is serious business, no shortcuts allowed. So I climbed onto the Boston Post Road, part of the quirky old U.S. 1 that first stitched the East Coast into one fabric, and slogged my way through the commercial fall-out of greater New York. After paying penance along the chock-a-block Connecticut coast, I was rewarded by the sudden calmness of backwater Rhode Island and, departing U.S. 1 at Narragansett Bay, slid east into southernmost Massachusetts.

Near the colonial fishing port of Fall River, where my mother was born, I tuned into several Portuguese-language radio stations while spinning the dial. Continental Portuguese, as spoken in the lilting cadences of the old country, sounds more guttural and formal than Brazilians do, with the radio announcer calling out funeral arrangements to the dwindling community.

Almost as penance, I drove out the length of Cape Cod and nearly parked my car off Georges Bank, before retreating to terra firma. I hadn't been to the Outer Cape in decades, and was struck by how, as a National Seashore, everything appeared the same. It had frozen agreeably, immutably, into childhood memories of family softball down by Wellfleet's harbor, languorous beach days caught between high dunes and long waves, and warm Saturday nights spent at outdoor dances, where I stole my first kiss from a waif of a New York girl as young and innocent as I. In comparison to Boston girls, who wore snug tank suits to the beach, New Yorkers were fashion-forward, sporting bikini bottoms with no need to cover their tanned, flat chests. I recalled driving out on long hot weekdays in Mom's red VW convertible, and calling out the pastel colors of "Martha's bridges," as we named the repeated overpasses, in the long countdown to summer's start.

Where had it all gone? Memories deceive, no doubt, imbuing life and meaning to places – such as Wellfleet mid-week and off-season – otherwise bereft of people. With so many unbidden memories of carefree summers, I felt alone, the echoes of innocence growing ever fainter. Grieving, even when done with others, is a solitary affair.

My mood more conflicted than nostalgic, I re-crossed the Sagamore Bridge to the mainland and followed the Massachusetts coast north, the

land inundated with personal history. So many events – nearly all of them – of my first two and a half decades happened within a seventy mile radius of Cambridge, where I was born, after which my life spun off in myriad tangents, never to return for more than a visit. It was all too much, so I simply drove on: through Boston still in the upheaval of the Big Dig construction project, bypassing Brookline where my father and step-mother reside, then out the length of Cape Ann, skirting the North Shore where my paternal grandparents had always lived, from my creation to their eternity.

They had died while I languished in Latin America, and one of my principal regrets from my time overseas was missing the last years of their, and all my grandparents', lives. There is no way to replace them.

So in homage, the prior weekend, I visited their old, drafty home in Beverly Farms on a hill with a wide, distant view of the Atlantic. They had sold it years before to one of my father's college classmates, and built a low ranch house on the unsold property to the side. The buyer and their neighbor for the last decade of their lives had been John Updike, one of my favorite authors on 20th century American life.

After Granny and Sam's rapid-fire deaths, within six weeks of each other, I wrote Updike to thank him for being such a good neighbor to them, and he kindly wrote back on one of his famous plain, postage-prepaid postcards, afloat with the inky letters of an old typewriter. Thus began a minor correspondence that allowed me to ask if I could pay a visit on my return to the States. Amazingly, he replied Yes. So I called before Labor Day and, reaching his wife Martha, arranged for an afternoon visit, although Mrs. Updike warned "it will have to be brief" due to a later engagement.

Towards the top of Haven Hill, a hill I had climbed with anticipation so often as a grandchild, I stopped the car when I saw an elderly couple off to the side, whacking weeds in the vibrant late summer undergrowth.

Mrs. Updike noticed my arrival first and pulled off her white leather gardening gloves to greet me. She was wearing a wide-brimmed beige straw hat, under which the blue saucers of her eyes appeared like pale

moons under Jupiter's big ring. It was the first time I could recall meeting Martha.

When Mr. Updike turned off the weed cutter and started over our way, his wife called out cheerily if needlessly, "Look who's here!"

"I see," he replied, with a wisp of the wry smile that graces most of his back-flap publicity shots. Yet it was a genuine, welcoming smile, already anticipating the gentle humor that accompanies most human contact if you keep an eye out for it.

When we shook hands I noticed the brittleness of skin and the hint of psoriasis that Updike wrote about as his special burden. He had aged since I last saw him at my grandfather's funeral, but then so had my father – of the same age – whose aging appears more gradual.

I made some comments about interrupting important, fresh air work, which brought the requisite denials, and then offered to lend a hand in giving the great outdoors a thrashing, something I hadn't done in New England for years, and in these woods for half a lifetime, where I once felled entire trees for my grandfather's winter fire.

They smiled at my offer but continued to gather tools and gloves. My new Beetle elicited a few pleasantries, including one on the color which surprised me.

"Silver seems to be all the rage in cars these days," Updike said.

I wasn't aware of the fact, and felt intrigued that such a man of letters would follow consumer trends as mundane as car coloring. Yet any hint of following popular taste also made me defensive.

"My first choice was what they call Techno Blue, but they couldn't find one for last year's – this year's really – model in all of New England." Talking about cars with John Updike was making me nervous.

Updike offered his wife a hand over the driveway's low stone retaining wall, and did so in an attentive, gentlemanly manner, while I followed. Although it was only a hundred feet uphill to the driveway circle, I offered them and their tools a ride in my trendy-silver bug, which they declined. It would be easier to carry the gardening paraphernalia than to dirty up my new car, they demurred.

Once hill-crested, they offered to show me the garden and front

lawn, which opens onto an expansive view of the Atlantic, breathtaking in its panoramic late summer sweep. As a child I had barely noticed, distracted by more temporal and immediate things. A few pale sailboats dangled on the horizon.

Grandfather Sam had died facing such a magnetic view, looking resolutely into the thereafter. The cleaning woman found him slumped in the morning room's wicker armchair dressed in his Saturday finery of tweed jacket and tie, which he wore to visit Granny in her nursing home of the last half year. By his side, if I recall, was found a glass of lemonade, and on his lap a newspaper. He died, from the look of it quickly, of a heart attack.

The Updikes asked after my father and step-mother, and we discussed Brazil while sitting on the side veranda sipping iced tea. Updike once visited Brazil while promoting a translation of one of his novels and, based on the whirlwind book tour, had been intrigued enough by the country's exotic feel and history to plot a book about it. Which he promptly wrote, after plumbing original sources, in his one and only foray into literary surrealism. He plainly titled it *Brazil* and it is regrettably among the least well received of his many works.

I had written earlier in the year how I planned to leave my corporate career and try my hand full-time at writing, as I was having no luck juggling two careers, Louis Begley-like. (Yet another of his classmates.) He wrote back kindly, wishing me luck and offering some pointed advice, such as treating it as a nine-to-five job. He also replied, politely but firmly, that he didn't have any more advice than could fit on a postcard. Hence my visit would only be social in nature.

In any case, I decided to bring up the purpose of my trip tangentially, by returning to the subject of my brand new Beetle.

"I don't know if I mentioned it, but I bought the car mostly for one reason: to take a long car trip."

"Oh, really?"

"After being outside of the U.S. for so many years, I feel like I don't know the country anymore."

"That makes sense."

"That and September 11th, I suppose. As I wrote you, your piece in

The New Yorker after the attacks was one of the best I read. Especially how you ended it by saying, ‘Yes, the country is worth defending.’ Being overseas and so far away – along with most expats, I guess – made me feel at a loss, for how could I defend it? I almost felt unhinged.”

“You mentioned something like that in your letter.”

“And so why not climb into a car and get to know my country and countrymen again? I’ve never driven to the West Coast before, but instead of a straight shot, I’m thinking of going all the way around the borders.”

“That sounds tantalizing,” offered Mrs. Updike, who enjoys car trips herself, having recently returned from a European one.

“I’m not sure yet, but I think the theme could be something like ‘defending the borders.’”

Updike, who watches carefully, now became even more watchful. He accomplished this while slouching further into his cushioned wicker chair, propping up his weighty head in one elbow-grounded arm, and squinting his eyes as if to see more clearly.

“Sounds like you’re planning a book,” he observed with the decibels of a smile.

“Yeah, if things work out,” I replied as casually as possible.

Pause.

“Well, it’s a nice idea.”

“Thank you,” I replied, no doubt beaming with pleasure.

“You’ll have to be quite gregarious.”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“You should read, if you haven’t already, Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley*, which is the classic in that sort of thing. But also, *Blue Highways* by...”

“By the Indian writer,” I interrupted, “Heat-Moon?”

“Yes, William Least Heat-Moon, that’s it. At least for the way he travels.”

“Yes, and how funny! I just pulled out an old copy from my things.”

“So, how long are you planning to travel?” Mrs. Updike asked.

“I hope to start next week in New York and return, perhaps, in time for Thanksgiving.”

“Oh, but I was thinking it would take much longer. Shouldn’t you reconsider? I mean, you wouldn’t want to rush things once they got going?”

In the free advice category, the subject of Length of Trip came out on top. Friends had made similar comments, some insisting on a bare minimum of six months. I took it as a compliment that once the romanticism of *doing the rounds* of the U.S. caught on, people warmed up and hyperbole ensued. Invariably I reminded the advice-giver that it only takes several days of non-stop driving to cross the continent, and tried not to mention a time frame again.

But Mrs. Updike was adamant and, given my desire to be with family over Thanksgiving, came up with another solution.

“Why don’t you just park your buggy half way through the trip and fly back for Thanksgiving? Then you can return and continue your travels where you left off.”

I granted her that anything was possible, that I would see how things progressed, and thanked her for her suggestion. In the end, though, the trip would be mine to take and mine alone. Modernist conventions, such as breaking things up and papering them over, just didn’t sit well with me. Besides, long trips develop certain rhythms which, once broken, are difficult to resume.

So that was that. When Mrs. Updike said their next engagement was fast approaching, I sat on the edge of the white wicker sofa, ready to bolt at a moment’s notice. Updike continued merrily on, as though they had all the time in the world, and even offered to show me the full ocean views – that used to be my father’s, as a young boy – from the third floor garret room, which I declined.

Before leaving I promised to send a few postcards from the road and, at the last moment, asked Updike if he would sign my copy of *Brazil*, which I pulled out of my side bag.

He did so graciously without the slightest hesitation, and even apologized for his poor sight without reading glasses, fearful he might have slipped while writing my name. Yet when I looked at the short

dedication in the privacy of my buggy, I couldn't detect the slightest flaw.

I would never see him again, an engaging perfectionist to the end.