

Fireworks Over Waterfall – An Extract from ‘The Bumper Book of Vitali’s Travels’

Introduction: The Land of Plastic Fossils

In the year 2000, I celebrated the onset of the new millennium by taking a long Trans-American journey following in the footsteps of my own personal Columbuses – Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, the famous tandem of witty and insightful Soviet satirists who visited the USA in 1935-36 and wrote a book *One-storied America* (or *Little Golden America* to echo the title of their internationally bestselling adventure novel *Little Golden Calf* – a sequel to *The Twelve Chairs*). Dispatched to the states by the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, I was filing my features and columns from the road, having visited thirty-nine states of the Union in less than ten months. In my columns and reports, I introduced the turn-of-the millennium British readers to the writers’ ‘one-storied’ America – the country of FD Roosevelt and George Gershwin, of ‘yellow journalism’ and the New Deal, of the first ‘air-conditioned refrigerators’ and the superb WPA guides – as well as to mine and much more modern, Vitali’s America. And although many American (and Russian) realities have changed dramatically in the course of sixty-five years, I tried to stick to the main principle of Ilf and Petrov, who, according to the 1937 *New York Times* review of *Little Golden America*, were ‘never guilty of sacrificing the facts as they saw them for the sake of a quip’ – a huge compliment for the writers who had managed to retain their wit and integrity against all odds.

Having returned to Britain, I started working on a travel book about that trip. *The Land of Plastic Fossils* was its title. Then 9/11 happened – and the book remained unfinished.

Below I will reproduce the hitherto unpublished first chapter of that book as well as a handful of my columns written – literally – on the road.

Driving across the Arizona desert in 1935, Ilf and Petrov entered a reservation of petrified forest. 'It is an astounding spectacle to find in the midst of the great silence of the desert prone trunks of petrified trees which have preserved the outward appearance of the most ordinary reddish-brown wooden trunks,' they note and continue: 'The process of altering the wood of the trees into salt, lime and iron had gone on for millions of years. These trees have acquired the hardness of marble.'

The reservation had a small museum, where, as they would say in modern America, the 'interpretation' of petrified wood processing (cutting, polishing, etc) was conducted. Having left the 'carefully guarded' (to stop tourists from stealing pieces of precious wood, no doubt) reservation, the writers stopped at a gasoline station, 'surrounded by a fence made up helter-skelter out of the petrified trees.' What they saw there, largely spoiled their mood for the day: 'Here was carried on a lively trade in pieces of wood at fifteen cents and up. A handicraft man with a motor that roared throughout the desert feverishly manufactured souvenirs in the form of brooches and bracelets ... Was it worthwhile to lie for so many millions of years in order to be transformed into an unprepossessing brooch with the inscription "Souvenir of ..."?'

Without realising it, the writers pinpointed a very important trend characterising the prevailing American attitude to their natural environment – the ever-growing phenomenon, which Todd Gitlin, a modern American social scientist calls 'Domestication of nature.' Still in the bud in 1935, this attitude has been growing ever since and had reached truly alarming proportions by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In the course of my travels across America in year 2000, I came to the conclusion that 'domestication' of wild nature involves two main trends: plasticising (ie making it look and feel plastic) and packaging. Let me give you some examples.

I arrived in Badlands National Park by the end of my American travels being so tired that I didn't feel like getting off the bus. It was scorching outside and, having visited several canyons and national parks within the previous couple of weeks, I thought I could hardly get excited by the sight of yet another moose or a curiously shaped rock. The numerous 'Scenic Turn Off' highway signs had suddenly acquired a negative second meaning. To my exhausted self, American canyons were like lap dancers: no matter how stunning, if you've seen one – you've seen them all.

The ground in the Badlands was barren, bumpy and hard to walk upon which led me to understand why the Dakota Indians referred to the area as *makeo sica*, meaning 'land bad,' and early French-Canadian trappers termed it *les mauvaises terres a traverser* – 'bad lands to travel across.'

In the end, I was glad to have made the effort. Thanks to a couple of knowledgeable and straightforward rangers, I learnt a lot about this ancient natural reserve, which used to be the bottom of a giant sea and later – a breeding ground for such pre-historic creatures as three-toed horses, sabre-toothed cats and ruminating pigs (!), whose politically correct scientific name was Oreodonts. These (and other) animals' remains gradually turned into millions of fossils that – due to the unique nature of the soil – stood a good chance of remaining in the Badlands forever, had it not been for fossil-hunters who started carrying away wagonloads of petrified remains to be sold to museums, scientists and private collectors, or just for souvenirs.

With such methodical embezzlement of fossils going on for over a hundred years (since the late nineteenth century), no wonder that by the end of the twentieth century there were none of them left in the Badlands. What could be done about it? Anywhere else, but in America, probably nothing. But the Badlands – for better or for the worse – WERE in America.

In the early 1990s, it was decided to make a number of replica fossils out of ... plastic and scatter them around the park. This done, the pseudo-fossils kept disappearing even faster than the real ones, probably because they did look exactly like the real ones, who knows. There is no such force that can stop an average American from pocketing a nice natural 'souvenir,' particularly if it is free, for his general hands-on approach to nature can be best characterised by the notorious quote from Ivan Michurin, a Stalinist Soviet biologist and Ilf and Petrov's contemporary: 'We must not expect gifts from mother nature – we must forcibly take them away from her!'

In the end, it was decided to collect all remaining plastic fossils and to put them under glass cases displayed along the footpaths. This is where they are now, and I had a chance to stare at them for as long as I wanted (about ten seconds at a time). They did look authentic, even slightly dusty (with the carefully replicated dust of history?) – but the fact remained: unbeknownst to most visitors, the Badlands fossils were made of plastic! Their real place was not under museum-style glass domes but on the shelves of the nearby Wall Drug shopping mall specialising in kitsch of all shapes and sizes under a dubious logo 'A Blast From the Past.'

This is how the title of this book was born.

I was told that the Badlands were all about erosion, and they were – in more than one way: to me, the plastic fossils of the Badlands became symbols of the on-going erosion of human values in the world's only remaining superpower – the United States of America.

'This claw is an authentic replica from a grizzly bear,' ran a price tag which I spotted in the gift shop of Kodiak Museum in Alaska. The 'authentic replica' (what an oxymoron!) was obviously made of plastic. The thriving American tradition of plasticising nature can be traced back to 1887, when Professor George Lincoln Goodale, founder of the Harvard University Botanical Museum, ordered life-size copies of plants and flowers to be made of glass to facilitate teaching botany. Over 300 glass flowers, produced by German artisans Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka between 1887 and 1936, are now on display at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, where guides describe them as 'unique works of art.' It so happened that I was touring Harvard in the company of a loquacious art historian from Brazil. 'Art?!' he exclaimed in disbelief looking at a model bee (also made of glass!) hovering above a model water lily. 'These glass flowers have nothing to do with art – it is simply superior craftsmanship closer to jewellery than art!'

I couldn't help thinking that the whole flower-production exercise was triggered by the sheer laziness of the respected Professor and his students reluctant to go on field trips and to explore living, not model, nature. Or could it be that as far back as in 1887 – long before the age of the motorcar – they already had an aversion to walking? 'Americans' legs will atrophy soon and will be replaced with special gadgets for pressing pedals,' remarked Ilya Ilf in his 1935 American notebooks. Sixty-five years later, I remember causing outrage by announcing to the owners of a small B&B near Woodstock, Vermont that I was going out for an evening walk. 'What?!' they yelled in chorus. 'A walk?! Tell us where you want to go, and we'll give you a lift.' 'No, thanks, I want to walk,' I insisted. 'But where are you going to walk to? No one walks anywhere here. It's dangerous ...' They were right: the B&B stood near a roaring highway with no sidewalks in sight. Blinded by headlights every five seconds, I had to trudge along a slippery grassy track during that bizarre evening stroll which I still undertook – if only out of principle.

Staying with friends in Pennsylvania in late May, 2001, I was puzzled to see them loading cross-country skis onto the roof of their car one warm sunny morning. 'Isn't this year's skiing

season over?’ I asked. ‘Not at all,’ they replied and explained that for \$40 per person per day one could ski all year round on the carpet of artificial plastic snow, brought to their area by truckloads. After that I was not particularly surprised to learn from a guide that the ice in New York’s Madison Square Garden arena is painted white before important hockey matches, just to make it appear ‘more presentable’ – the logic similar to that of a Soviet Army officer routinely ordering his men to paint the grass around the marching square green before a senior commander’s inspection.

For all the futility and exorbitant costs of modelling and making up the living nature, they are still preferable to its packaging – in the true sense of this word. In August 2001, some British newspapers ran a story on a growing USA fad for using live butterflies as an exciting alternative to confetti at weddings. A minimum mail or internet order of fifty live butterflies, packaged (!) and shipped in a special envelope, costs \$200. The envelopes are handed to wedding guests to open above the heads of newlyweds at the climactic moment. The Florida Monarch Butterfly Farm, one of the live-confetti distributors, advised customers to store butterflies ‘in a cool, dark place to keep them calm.’

Despite some muffled protests of butterfly experts that the packaging of live insects was cruel and environmentally damaging, the Butterfly Farm and its parent company Insect Lore were quick to offer a new kind of service asserting that ‘butterflies released at funerals can be very therapeutic to the mourning process.’ They didn’t specify whose funerals they were talking about – deceased humans, butterflies themselves, or (most likely) those of common sense.

When two ten-foot pythons were packaged and mailed to an animal shelter in Virginia by an anonymous sender (who probably decided he’d rather got fed up with the pets before they got fed up with him) in year 2000, it created a mild outcry in the USA. ‘I would call it cruelty if nothing else,’ Sylvia Smith, an animal control officer, said to the Associated Press. ‘You just don’t wrap up a couple of snakes and mail them.’ But it is obviously OK to wrap up and mail hundreds, if not thousands, of butterflies, who unlike snakes, cannot even bite ...

It has to be said, however, that occasionally wild nature does bite back. Quite literally I mean. In the hot summer of 1999, New Yorkers experienced multiple bites by locally bred mosquitoes (some of them were carriers of malaria and encephalitis), who invaded the Big Apple in unprecedented numbers as a result of global warming, to which the USA themselves were the world’s main contributor. The US is responsible for twenty-five per cent of the world’s production of carbon dioxide, yet the American government, leaned on by the coal, oil and automobile industries, has shown little will to cut that figure – the reluctance which leads to much more painful bites than those of mosquitoes. I am talking about tornadoes, floods, bush fires and droughts causing havoc to the economy and costing thousands of human lives.

At roughly the same time (July 1999), when New Yorkers were frantically scratching their multiple mosquito bites, Challenger, a bald eagle, bit President Clinton on the White House Lawn in Washington, DC. The incident took place during the ceremony to mark taking the bird, whose image appears on the Great Seal of the United States and on the dollar bill, off the list of endangered species. The bite of the First Executive’s left hand came shortly after Clinton referred to the eagle as ‘the living symbol of our democracy.’

As he left the ceremony, the President told his aides that Challenger ‘was not the only creature in Washington who would like to have a go on him’ and that ‘he had never had sexual relationship with that bird’ (I have made up the second part of the quote). But, seriously, I think

that Clinton was deservedly bitten not only by the symbol of American democracy, but also by the over-exploited American wild nature, endangered by plasticising and domestication.

* * *

Travelling in America is like being constantly exposed to one and the same familiar cliché. The only part of the country that beats all Hollywood-coined stereotypes is Alaska. And although Ilf and Petrov had never made it to the ‘the forty-ninth state’ (which was not even officially a state in 1935), during my hectic two weeks there I was often reminded the words of Ostap Bender, the main protagonist of their satirical novels, who once ironically characterised the breathtakingly beautiful mountains of the Great Caucasus as ‘Too showy. Weird kind of beauty. Idiot’s imagination.’

Being so obviously ‘un-American,’ Alaska nevertheless fits America well. In quantity and variety of natural wonders, it resembles a huge shopping mall of beauty: there’s so much of it that it becomes almost routine, and more often than not a traveller finds himself at a loss as to where to look – left, right, straight ahead or up in the sky. I would normally opt for the latter: nowhere else in the world, not even in Australia, have I seen such vast, all-embracing skies which are always alive with some sort of movement and drama. Staring at the skies was my favourite pastime in Alaska that never failed to distract me from more mundane things underneath.

Alas (a derivative of ‘Alas-ka?’), nature does get exploited and plasticised here too. Saying this, I don’t just mean such notorious human ‘exploits’ as the Exxon Valdez tanker running aground in Prince William sound and polluting 1,500 miles of Alaska’s coastline with eleven million gallons of crude oil in 1989; nor the routine dumping of toxic waste into Alaska waters and of millions of unscrupulous day-tourists into its fragile historic towns and villages by hundreds of giant cruise liners; nor even President Bush’s ambitious (if barbarous) plan to drill for oil and gas in Alaska’s wildlife reserves approved by the US House of Representatives in August 2001. While in Alaska, I was able to observe (when not staring up at the skies, that is) numerous smaller-scale and trivial, yet no less annoying, attempts at ‘domesticating’ nature to make it palatable, tame and ‘presentable’ for the American eye.

One of the first billboards I spotted on the way from Anchorage airport advertised ‘Aurora Borealis Presentation’ – an electronic recreation of the elusive Northern Lights, probably having as much likeness to the real thing as a roast-beef has to a cow. The next billboard – ‘26 Glacier Cruise in One Day! No Motion Sickness – Money Back Guarantee! All-You-Can-Eat Buffet!’ – sounded more tempting, and not because of the buffet. At least, the glaciers in the Prince William Sound were bound to be real, not recreated. Although in America one never knew for certain. To find out, I signed up for a cruise the following morning.

The starting point was Whittier, a peculiar town, all 300-odd inhabitants of which dwelled in one fourteen-storeyed tower. It took me two hours to get there from Anchorage by a special Alaska Railroad shuttle. The cruise vessel – a medium-size catamaran – was called *Klondike Express*.

‘Welcome aboard! My name is ‘Tracy!’ a young blonde in white sailor’s uniform announced through the microphone the moment we sailed off. ‘You won’t hurt our feelings if you don’t listen to our commentaries on history and places ...’ She carried on to say that the vessel had ‘co-educational heads’ and that the captain would try to come as close to the glaciers as possible. ‘Whatever is legal, we’ll do for you!’ she concluded cheerfully. To my considerable surprise, her

introductory comments were followed by a protracted round of applause from the passengers. I was trying to determine whether the applause was their reaction to what she had said, or the expression of joy over the fact that she had actually finished speaking.

It took me a while to realise that Americans simply loved applauding, as if eager to check whether both their hands were still in place and could be slammed together every five minutes or so. The passengers would applaud the views of the white-capped, as if gift-wrapped in snow, mountains on the horizon. They would clap their hands at the sight of each of the promised twenty-six (I didn't count them, but a number of my fellow-travellers did!) glaciers which made me remember how I once witnessed in Paris a busload of American tourists bursting into applause at the sight of the Eiffel Tower – as if expecting the famous structure to curtsy in return. The intermittent applause grew into an ovation when, half-way through the journey, three large photo vignettes were brought up to V-deck by the crew. 'Merry Christmas!', 'Happy Holiday!' and 'Happy Chanukah!' was written on them. A cheerful queue of the passengers willing to be photographed with Cascade Glacier in the background (and under a relevant inscription) immediately formed, and a specially delegated member of the crew kept snapping right and left with other people's cameras. I came to understand the origins of the taciturn glacier's emerald colour: like the long-suffering 'Mona Lisa' in Le Louvre, it must have been affected by camera flashes. Or just turned green with embarrassment.

The main paradox of the situation lay in the fact that the three-million-year-old Cascade Glacier represented eternity, while most people aboard the catamaran did not have this word in their lexicon and were only preoccupied with the given photographic moment under a silly 'Happy Holiday' vignette.

'Classifieds' and 'Personals' are by far the best reads in Alaskan newspapers. Where else in the world can you see hundreds of ads offering to buy (or to sell) second-hand snowmobiles and hydroplanes and/or spare parts to them? Alaskans are a prosperous lot (they are exempt from federal taxes, but receive a \$1,000 per person per year from the US government as a special allowance), and there are thousands of hydroplane owners in Anchorage alone, and parking spots for the planes are as common there as supermarkets and fast-food outlets. There is also a growing problem of night-time drink-flying, when tipsy plane-owner locals whiz back home after a rowdy evening in the bar.

As for 'Personals' (or 'Lonely Hearts') ads, they beat anything of the kind in their sheer desperation. I mean the ones coming from men seeking women. The reason for that is that men outnumber women five- to sevenfold in Alaska. Here are a couple of examples from 'Personals' – the 'Personals' section of *Anchorage Press*: 'Need a F right now! Let's have hot monkey love in public places!'; 'Need a woman! Age and race open. You will not be disappointed!' The last 'cry in the women-less Alaskan wilderness' might be just a bit too optimistic, for Alaskan women do get 'disappointed' fairly often. They have even come up with a saying to describe their chances of finding a 'quality' partner: 'The odds are good, but the goods are odd.'

The only other regular features of Alaskan newspapers that can compete with the ads in their idiosyncrasy are stories of encounters with wildlife. The headlines of such reports are usually self-explanatory: 'Bears Sighted in Town' (*Homer News*) 'Bear Attacks Second Dog in Sitka' (*South East Empire*), 'Jogger Chased by Bear' (*Anchorage Daily News*), and so on. They show that Alaskan wildlife is generally alive and well, with the exception perhaps of some unfortunate Sitka dogs who do not count as wildlife anyway. Every resident of Alaska has his (or her) own wildlife

encounter story to tell. A woman from an Anchorage suburb assured me that elks routinely wandered into her back garden of an evening. She also told me how she was pursued by a brown bear while jogging (jogging seems to be a risky occupation in Alaska unless you can run faster than a bear). But the story that I read in *Homer News* one day was so utterly incredible that I could be forgiven for taking it not with a grain, but with a good handful of salt. Here it is:

Orca Takes the Hali-Bait

(*'Orca' is another name for killer whale – VV*)

Clients aboard a Flat Fun Charters boat last week got their money's worth when an unexpected guest paid a visit. A deckhand on the *Sea Hawk* was pulling in what he thought was a fair-sized halibut when a bull Orca surfaced with the fish in his mouth. The crew and the passengers spotted the killer whale about 50 feet from the boat, which was in open water near the Kachemak Bay. 'He rolled and looked at us and chomped it then kind of spit it out,' said Martin Reid, the skipper. The Orca crushed some bones in the halibut but didn't eat it ... Then it came for a closer look, dodging under the boat and swimming next to it. 'You could have stepped off the boat onto his back,' said Reid. 'It was kind of freaking everyone out.'

The story was substantiated by photos (made by the skipper) on which one could clearly see a hapless angler trying to pull out a torpedo-shaped submarine-sized whale, or at least pretending to do so.

I ran to the harbour and promptly booked myself on a halibut fishing charter the following morning. 'Remember all the fish you caught can be packaged and sent anywhere in the world,' a 'fish controller' girl told me from the window of her shabby wooden booth on the pier. I said that I didn't want my whale to be sent 'anywhere the world': I wanted it to go straight to London, even if they had to charter a special cargo flight for that. 'Sure!' the girl replied with a smile and proceeded to compliment me on my 'lovely British accent' (it is only in Alaska and, possibly, also in Tasmania that I can occasionally pass for a Brit).

But instead of hooking a whale, or even a halibut, I caught a severe bout of sea-sickness and spent all my time on board the *Sea Witch* lying supine in the boat's tiny cabin. My only consolation was that, with my environmentally friendly fishing (ie fishing with no catch), I played no part in the packaging of Alaska's burgeoning wildlife.

The boat's owners were called 'Sorry Charlie Charters,' by the way. I wish I knew it before embarking.

Having failed to catch, or even to glimpse, a whale, I was determined to make up for it on the Kodiak Island, famous for its 'watchable wildlife' – as it was put by a local tourist brochure, particularly its brown Kodiak bears. The same brochure contained some 'Common Sense in Bear Country' tips which included:

- Avoid surprising bears and make plenty of noise
- Avoid crowding bears; respect their personal space
- Plan ahead, stay calm, identify yourself, don't run

I was quite happy not to 'crowd' the bears, albeit not quite sure how that could be combined with 'identifying myself' and not running away immediately afterwards. Should I just say: 'Hi, my

name is Vitali, and I came here just to watch you!?’ But what if the bear mistakes this tirade for an intrusion of his ‘personal space?’

With all these questions on my mind, I boarded a four-seat Cessna 206 hydroplane for a forty-minute flight to the shores of Fraser Lake in the depth of Alaskan wilderness. Apart from Dan, the pilot, there were two more passengers on board: a young honeymooning couple from Philadelphia.

‘Can your hydroplane land on the ground?’ the husband asked Dan shortly after we took off.

‘Yes, it can. But only once,’ the taciturn pilot replied.

It was the best joke I had heard during all my travels in America.

We landed (‘watered?’) on the lake and, having put on anti-mosquito nets, kindly provided by Dan, walked through the dense forest for about ten minutes until we saw a happy family of brown bears trout-fishing in a stream. I was about to identify myself, but Dan pressed a finger to his lips. So preoccupied were the bears that they paid no attention to us for the whole duration of our one-and-a-half hour watch. I was particularly taken by a fluffy bear-cub, being taught how to fish by his daddy (or was it mummy – I couldn’t be sure). The cub was a quick learner, and soon he started ferreting out a wriggling fish each time he dipped his little paws into the water. He was a much better fisherman than I.

When we were hiking back to the plane, I felt an urge to go to the loo. ‘Can I quickly hide behind the bushes?’ I asked Dan. ‘There’s no need to,’ he said. ‘There’s a nice lavatory on your right.’ He pointed to a little clearing in the forest. There, half-hidden by lush foliage, stood a gleaming stainless-steel hut. Inside, it was spotless – with hot water, hand-drier, general supply of paper towels and paper toilet seats. In the corner, there was a special tap for washing one’s feet!

If you asked me what impressed me most in America, I would probably say: ‘A state-of-the-art public toilet in the midst of Alaska’s Bear Country – a pristine and untouched wilderness, with no roads and no humans for hundreds of miles around.’

I must have looked ridiculous emerging from that air-conditioned loo into clouds of mosquitoes in the middle of nowhere. What’s more, it made me feel ridiculous too. Suddenly my bear-watching experience was no longer an adventure, but a virtual-reality ‘presentation’ in a museum auditorium, with soft comfy seats and ‘Exit’ signs glowing soothingly in the dark.

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‘After a visit to Alaska, you never quite go home’ – or so they say. And I didn’t. Instead I went straight back to ... America, for Alaska, as I had heard so many times while exploring ‘The Last Frontier,’ had nothing to do with it.

At the end of their first month in the USA, Ilf and Petrov were invited to address the prestigious Dutch Treat Club at the New York Hotel Ambassador. They prepared a brief speech, which was translated into English, and one of them, ‘in no way embarrassed by the fact that he found himself in such a large gathering of experts of the English language, read it from a sheet of paper:

‘Mr Chairman, Gentlemen:

We have come on a great journey from Moscow to see America. Besides New York we have had time to be in Washington and in Hartford. After living a month in New York we felt the pangs of love for your great and purely American city. Suddenly we were doused with cold

water. “New York is not America,” we were told by our New York friends. “New York is only the bridge between Europe and America. You are still on the bridge.” Then we went to Washington, District of Columbia, the capital of the United States, assuming thoughtlessly that surely this city was America. By the evening of the second day we felt with satisfaction that we were beginning to discriminate a little in matters American. “Washington is not America,” we were told. “It is a city of government officials. If you really want to see America, you are wasting your time here.” We dutifully put our scratched suitcases into an automobile and went to Hartford, in the state of Connecticut, where the great American writer, Mark Twain, spent his mature years. Here we were again honestly warned: “Bear in mind that Hartford is not yet America.” When we began to ask about the location of America, the Hartfordites pointed vaguely to the side. Now we have come to you, Mr Chairman and gentlemen, and ask you to show us where America really is located, because we have come here in order to learn as much as we can about it.’

‘The speech was a great success. The members of the Dutch Treat Club applauded it a long time,’ Ilf and Petrov remark in *Little Golden America*. ‘Only much later we learned that most of the members of the club did not understand a single word of this speech, because the strange Russo-English accent of the orator drowned out completely the profound thoughts concealed in it.’

I kept recalling the writers’ ‘speech’ often while travelling around New England during the so-called Fall Foliage season, normally occurring between mid-September and mid-October. On a bus from Boston airport to Concord, New Hampshire, I was glued to the window. With my mouth agape, I was trying to absorb the wild riot of colour displayed by the trees lining the highway. It was simply beyond description: I never knew so many shades of purple, red and brown existed in nature. I felt myself dissolved and drowning in this incredible natural palette.

The moment I arrived in Concord, however, I was ‘doused with cold water.’ ‘You have come too late,’ a young woman from the local Chamber of Commerce who met me at the bus station commented. ‘The leaves are just behind peak. Not half as good as ten days ago ...’

I tried to object meekly that they were still good enough for me, but she didn’t listen. ‘Leaf-peeping is a big business here,’ she said while driving me to my hotel and explained that the season is ‘officially’ (*sic*) divided into four ‘official’ (*sic* again!) stages:

1. Just beginning
2. Well-established
3. Peak and
4. Just behind peak.

With my Jewish luck, I obviously hit the last – and the least interesting (‘officially,’ no doubt) stage.

The Notting Hill Carnival of maples, aspens and birches was whooshing past the windows of our car. Having suppressed a sudden yawn, I had the impression that the screaming brightness of their leaves had indeed faded in the past several minutes.

In his *United States, 1893* guidebook, Karl Baedeker remarked that ‘the colour of autumn leaves is an additional attraction’ of New England. 107 years later it has become the main attraction and a ‘big business’ indeed. True, one can still admire autumn leaves for free, but, as I was told in Vermont (after they dutifully assured me that my arrival was ‘belated’: what I saw was

not the ‘real fall’ and the leaves were not as good as the week before), the visiting leaf-peepers add over a billion dollars to the state coffers each autumn. No wonder leaf-peeping is often referred to as ‘a cornerstone of New England tourist industry.’

Like every big (and small) business, New England autumn has to be properly managed. In New Hampshire, they designate twenty ‘official leaf-peepers’ whose no-less ‘official’ duties include observing the leaves, compiling twice-weekly reports and suggesting the best ‘leaf-peeping routes.’ There were not many of those on offer by the time I arrived in Connecticut, where I was immediately informed that ‘the oaks had turned’ (meaning became brown and no longer gold) and the prime fall-foliage was over. They nevertheless kindly offered to take me to a ‘primary foliage viewing area,’ where, allegedly, I could still catch some last ‘truly golden’ leaves, but I refused.

I couldn’t, however, refuse a copy of *Leaf-Peeper’s Guide* which I studied in the quiet of my hotel room. I had read somewhere that the exact mechanism of the spectacular displays of autumn leaves’ colours was a mystery to scientists. Whether it was true or not, I preferred it to remain a fairy tale – like that of Santa Claus. But a ‘big business’ New England autumn had become in America had no place for fairy tales. My brand-new *Leaf-Peeper’s Guide* left no stone (or leaf) unturned to shatter the mystery to smithereens: ‘In fall, partly because of shorter periods of daylight and the cooler temperatures, the leaves stop making food (*sic* – VV). The chlorophyll breaks down and the green color disappears. Yellow and orange, previously masked by the green (? – VV), appear. The vibrant reds, purples and bronzes come from other chemical processes ...’ Nice and clear.

A brilliant book *Vinyl Leaves. Walt Disney World and America* by Stephen M Fjellman, a leading American anthropologist, starts with the following description:

‘There is a tree in Central Florida. It is maybe ninety feet high and huge around the base and has a crown that stretches across almost as many yards as the tree is tall. From the top of this tree, when the wind is still, you can see almost to the Caribbean. The trunk looks about as much like that of a live oak as one might wish. The bark is deeply grained and covered with that pea-soup green colored stuff you see on the trees in hot, wet places. It’s a big nice tree, a good place for the treehouse that adorns it. But it’s not made of wood. The trunk and the branches are formed out of pressed concrete wrapped around a steel-mesh frame. The bark and green stuff that cover much of it are painted on. ***The leaves, all 800,000 of them are made of vinyl.*** (italics are mine – VV).’

Stephen Fjellman proceeds to explain that the tree, ‘Disneyodendron eximus (“out-of-ordinary Disney tree”)’ is in the Adventureland part of Walt Disney’s World Magic Kingdom. For him, it became a symbol of ‘commodification’ (just another word for ‘plasticising,’ I presume) of modern American culture.

The widow of my hotel room in Concord, NH, overlooked a vast courtyard of a Victorian lunatic asylum, now – a ‘psychiatric hospital.’ In the treacherous semi-light of the early dusk, the ‘past-peak’ autumn leaves in it were aglow and blending with the headlights of the cars behind the hospital fence. What ‘chemical processes’ had made them look so desperately gorgeous? Or was it because they preferred burning alive to being plasticised?

The trees were offering no answers. Only the falling leaves slowly pirouetted in the air, as if trying to delay the ultimate moment of dying. And the snow-white trunks of birches were

bursting through the red-brown setting – like piercing screams of discord through the harmonious symphony of autumn ...

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‘At any time of day, at any time of year, in the worst possible weather, passenger autobuses race across America. When at night you see a heavy and threatening machine flying across the waste spaces and the deserts, you involuntarily remember the post diligences of Bret Harte run by desperate drivers ... America is located on a large automobile highway.’

Travelling across America by buses in the year 2000, I often recalled these words by Ilf and Petrov. Sixty-five years on, America still stood at the roadside of a hypnotically endless and surprisingly empty (outside big metropolises) highway.

Having crossed New Mexico, our hard-working ‘autobus’ rolled into Texas, America’s second largest state after Alaska.

For the first hundred miles or so, the landscape remained unchanged: same arid, sun-burnt prairie; same brown mountains on the horizon; same ranch fences along the highway, which was getting more and more forlorn and deserted. As Ilf and Petrov observed driving through the area sixty-five years ago, ‘the gasoline stations became less and less frequent, but to make up for that, the hats of the rare residents became broader and broader.’

The ‘gasoline stations’ where we stopped were selling only local newspapers, carrying little apart from school lunch menus and ‘Lonely Hearts’ ads, with head-shots of people in different stages of obesity. They also offered fly-stained collections of bearded ‘cowboy jokes,’ appalling machine cappuccino and cans of mysterious ‘Meat Food Product.’ The customers were beefy, ruddy-faced farmers in ‘broad’ Mexican hats and leather belts, with buckles so huge that they covered their groins.

‘Don’t Mess With Texas’ warned a sticker on the windscreen of a passing farmer’s truck, carrying a sad, cockroach-like (black and compact) longhorn cow in its back. To be frank, there was nothing much to mess with, for after this brusque encounter other vehicles disappeared, and the only moving things in sight were oil pump-jacks, nodding tirelessly, like praying Orthodox Jews. We were in the Chihuahuan Desert, whose sandy, cactus-thorned fingers reach into Texas from Mexico, across the Rio Grande, to blend with the southern extremes of the Rocky Mountains.

‘One can hardly find anything more grandiose and more beautiful in the world than an American desert ... the beauty created by nature is supplemented by the beauty created by the deft hands of men,’ wrote Ilf and Petrov. Coming from the hastily ‘industrialised,’ yet still distinctly third-world-ish, USSR of the 1930s, the writers could not help admiring ‘the even highway with its silvery bridges, its neatly placed water mains, its mounds and dips.’ They even concluded that ‘the automobile in the desert seemed twice as beautiful than in the city!’ Could it be partly due to the fact that the speed limit in Texas was then just forty-five miles per hour?

Riding along the semi-dried Rio Grande, marking the border with Mexico, sixty-five years later, I was ready to share the Russians’ enthralment with the natural beauty of the desert – its piercing silence and quiet loneliness echoing the official logo of Texas – ‘the Lone Star State’; its resilient Dead Man’s Fingers – a breed of red-blossomed cacti, stubbornly sticking out of dry earth; with its carpets of blue bonnets (tiny azure flowers), making parts of it aquamarine and almost sea-like; its ‘dust devils’ – gentle puffs of sand and dust lifting above its surface here and

there, as if the desert itself was breathing them out, while mischievously indulging in the most subversive of all anti-American activities – smoking.

As for the ‘man-made beauty,’ I was not so sure. It was nice to see (and to feel) that the desert highway was indeed as smooth as the Beltway around Washington DC, that plumbing in the abundant and spotlessly clean road-side ‘rest-rooms’ in the middle of nowhere was as perfect as at a Marriott Hotel in Manhattan. On the other hand, I was rather taken aback by the eyesore of a huge hot-house, which, in the permanently red-hot desert, looked as appropriate as a fridge on top of an iceberg; or by a handful of useless picnic gazebos, made of iron and offering no protection from the scorching desert sun. The only good thing about these gazebos was that burgers and sausages would fry spontaneously (together with the unlikely picknickers) inside them.

Unlike Ilf and Petrov, who stayed for several days in El Paso, I stopped in the little border town of Lajitas, claiming to be ‘the remotest settlement in the USA.’ Local tourist brochures assert that more people have spent the night at the bottom of the Grand Canyon than in Lajitas, boasting ‘the most breath-taking sunrises and sunsets in Texas’ – the fact that is probably meant to make the gullible Grand Canyon revellers green with envy. According to the brochures, Lajitas was also the home of the ‘famous beer drinking goat’ (one resident wit confided in me that he was actually the town’s Mayor).

Built in 1915 as a cavalry post to protect the area from the Mexican ‘hot-eyed bandit’ Pancho Villa, Lajitas had gone into decay by 1977, when it was bought by the Mischer Corporation, with the aim of turning it into a popular health spa. A couple of hotels and a small touristy shopping mall were constructed, but potential holidaymakers were not in hurry to visit this natural sauna, especially in summer, when the temperature in Lajitas seldom drops below 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

As for the 300 local residents, their plight remained almost as pitiful as in the times of Pancho Villa, although much less exciting.

An ageless local woman – dried-out and sinewy, like a desert plant – told me that to buy basic groceries they still had to travel 160 miles, and that children had to be driven to school to the town of Terlingua – a two-hour-long daily journey.

‘Parents of schoolkids get partly reimbursed by the state government, but, in actual fact, we spend this money – 25 cents per mile – on other things,’ the woman chuckled.

Listening to her, it was hard to believe that she was talking about the twenty-first century USA.

The breakthrough came last February, by which time the Mischer Corporation had all but given up on Lajitas and put the town up for auction. The bids were lazy and half-hearted, like the biting of bream in April, until – one hour before the closure – the auctioneer heard the characteristic rattle of chopper blades above his head. Like in a good ancient Greek tragedy (or in a bad Hollywood movie), the sound signified the arrival of *deus ex machina* (a god routinely introduced into an ancient drama to resolve the intricacies of the plot), or, in this case, the highest bidder, who – quite literally – descended onto Lajitas from the heavens, in his personal French Astar 350 B3 helicopter. Having barely touched the ground, Steve Smith, an Austin property developer and a co-founder of Excel telephone company, snapped up Lajitas for \$3,950,000 (\$4.2 million with the auctioneer’s fees).

‘The sale ends an era. Begins another,’ commented the *Lajitas Sun*, the town’s monthly rag, in its usual laconic fashion, imitating the locals’ habit of speaking curtly and through clenched teeth to prevent ubiquitous flies from entering their mouths.

I was lucky: Steve Smith was in town and agreed to a quick interview. A tall, thick-set man in a navy polo-shirt, he had a radiant smile and oozed with the famous Texan can-do attitude.

‘I love the desert. I came here to realise my dream and to express my creativity. The place was stale when I bought it, and I’m gonna change it,’ he said.

He shared his plans to build a jet strip, a golf course and a swimming pool in Lajitas ‘to attract families in winter.’

I asked about the locals, and he promised ‘to improve utilities and to supply school buses and medical facilities’ – a perfect rhyme, which, as I hoped, would not end up as just another abstract example of the never-ending poetry of the desert – the poetry, only slightly marred by the fact that some bits of it could now be bought and sold.

‘The word ‘desert’ is frequently used as a symbol of monotony. The American desert, however, is unprecedentedly varied,’ noted Ilf and Petrov. Indeed, the last thing I expected to find in Lajitas, the remotest and the most ‘un-American’ place in the USA, was an archetypal ‘American’ story of the sale of a modern, even if God-forsaken, town – with all its long-suffering inhabitants.

The Russian writers were right: the American desert was anything but boring.

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