

The Kindness of Strangers

Val and I have done a fair amount of traveling and it seems that every once in a while we find ourselves in a situation which attests to the kindness of strangers. Remember the line of Blanche from *"A Streetcar Named Desire?"* *"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."*

We were traveling in Alaska during the summer of 2011. If you haven't driven in Alaska, you're in for a surprise. It is huge. Combine Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Michigan, superimpose them on Alaska and there will still be room to spare. But there aren't that many roads. Any one of the preceding states probably has more miles of interstate, state, county and city roads than Alaska. It is sparsely populated, with a population less than that of greater Milwaukee. There are small, usually Native Alaskan towns than can only be reached by bush plane. We had just finished a 2 night stay in Copper Center, near the spectacular Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. From our hotel, you could see Mt. Wrangell and half a dozen other peaks. This park is 6 times the size of Yellowstone National Park. Even in the middle of July, the mountain peaks were covered with snow.

We left Copper Center and were driving along the highway north to Fairbanks. The highway overlooked a wide riverbed below. Val noticed a herd of bison so we stopped. The herd numbering about 200 was moving slowly along the side of the riverbed. Using my new 200 mm lens, we got some nice pictures. It was time to move on to Fairbanks. When we got to the car, it was locked. Mario to Val – *"did you lock the car?"* Val to Mario – *"did you lock the car?"* Where's the key? OMG, it is in the car! We were locked out. Call a tow truck? Unless you're close to a town in Alaska, cell phones don't work. There were other cars that had stopped to view the bison. It didn't take long for their attention to focus on us. Everyone's first reaction was to walk around the car. Everybody checked their cell phones. One family had an AT & T phone which worked. We called the rental company who said they'd have someone there in an hour. The hour came and went. More travelers stopped to view the bison and easily noticed that we were in distress. One couple offered us granola bars. Then a couple stopped and engaged us in conversation. It turned out they had come from Australia. They left us some bottled water. It started to drizzle. We both had to answer a call of nature which is never a problem for guys but always presents a challenge for the ladies. Four hours had passed with no sign of the rental company. An Alaskan couple pulling a large RV stopped. To make the long story short, they offered their "home" which we were glad to accept. They had an AT & T phone which worked so I finally called AAA. A service truck came not quite two hours later (no one ever showed from the rental car company). The guy got out, pried the door with a plastic wedge, inserted a thin rod and pulled the inside door handle. The whole operation didn't take ten seconds. Our planned 6 hour drive turned into a twelve hour trip which would have been a real ordeal were it not for the kindness of travelers and locals. And the Alaskans offered us some moose meat to take back to our hotel but we declined.

During the summer of 2005, Procter & Gamble offered me a chance to work for several months at a just opened Pringles factory in the middle of England. The area is referred to as the midlands for obvious reasons. Although the factory is in an industrial area known for now shuttered steel plants, the surrounding towns and countryside is quintessential English. There are gently rolling hills green as can be with occasional small herds of sheep. The towns have homes and shops right out of the nineteenth century. I mean that in a very flattering way. Some farmhouses and barns have thatched roofs. Homes have brick exteriors, some with steep slate roofs.

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Val joined me on a couple of occasions so on weekends we enjoyed driving around the countryside. One of the trips we made was to the Scottish border where I wanted to see Hadrian's Wall. Having gone to China the year before and climbing the Great Wall, I had visions of imposing structures, walls wide enough for horses, with parapets and turrets. After all the Romans are better engineers than the Chinese, right? Think of aqueducts, the coliseum, Roman Forum and Pantheon. It turns out that what remains of the wall was no more than three feet or so in height. The bricks were purloined by the locals to make their own walls and cottages. Anyway Hadrian's Wall wasn't anything like I was expecting it to be.

From Hadrian's Wall we drove on to Edinburgh where we had reserved an apartment near the Edinburgh Castle. Remember that in the UK, they drive on the opposite side of the road than we do. Instead of stop signs or signals at intersections they have roundabouts. They didn't have GPS available in rental cars yet but we had a map. Well, you guessed it; we were soon hopelessly lost in rush hour Edinburgh. I stopped at a gas station and approached the nearest car. The driver was an older gentleman – he had a shock of white hair – with someone I would assume was his spouse. I asked him if he could help me with directions to our apartment. He shook his head, probably thinking about how this foreigner could be so far out of the way. He simply said "follow me." I did. It would have taken Mapquest type instructions or a police escort to reach our destination assuming we didn't take a wrong turn at a roundabout. When we got to the apartment, I offered to reimburse our Good Samaritan for some gas. This was after Hurricane Katrina which pushed gas prices up everywhere. A gallon in the UK sold for \$7. He waved me off, wouldn't take anything and went on his way. We had a wonderful time in Edinburgh, even having dinner at a pub supposedly frequented by Robert Burns. But I regret not trying haggis.

We have more travel stories demonstrating the kindness of strangers but that's for another essay.