



Carole and Peter Gibbs in Oporto, Portugal a few years ago.

Chicago or Bust

A LIFELONG FRIENDSHIP IS BORNE AMIDST THE SHOCK OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

THAT OLD GRINCH, George Bernard Shaw, once said of marriage that it was at best a dangerous experiment. However, this did not dissuade our son and his American girlfriend from wishing to ‘bench test’ their relationship and they set a September date for their wedding in Chicago.

In keeping with the next generation’s itch to do things differently, the ceremony was to take place at the Tivoli Theatre in the Chicago suburb of Downers Grove. Built in 1928 at the tail-end of the silent film era, the Tivoli boasts an art-deco interior and a Wurlitzer organ that rises from the depths like a neon-lit tomb.

The dubious thrill of hearing the Wurlitzer however lay three days ahead of us as we boarded our 747 flight to Chicago. In my pocket were two platinum wedding rings specially commissioned by the couple on their previous visit to the United Kingdom. As the groom’s parents, we could afford to be relaxed. Other than for the rings, the arrangements and angst involved in most weddings had been kept a useful four thousand miles away. Now all we had to do was to sink back in our seats and let British Airways take the strain.

The only slight niggle came from behind us where a posse of Asian travellers had seated the elderly patriarch of their family. The white-bearded gentleman began a non-stop recitation of the Koran as soon as we took off. The soft susurrant of his voice merging with the drone of the Rolls Royce jet engines eventually sent me to sleep. Only in retrospect did I acknowledge the ominous mood music the old man’s venerations had produced.

TROUBLE IN THE AIR

When I woke up, we were two thousand miles over the Atlantic. I pressed the small screen in front of me and noted the speed, distance, and animated visual of our journey. Simplified though the picture was, something about our direction of travel seemed wrong. And something else. The practised

smiles and cheery banter of the cabin crew had given way to grim expressions and a not altogether successful show of calm under pressure.

Waiting outside the loo, I heard the chief steward talking to the flight crew through the plane’s telephone system. The usual shuttling of personnel to and from the flight deck seemed not to be an option. We learned later that under instructions the captain had locked and barred the communicating door.

When I returned to my seat the patriarch was still whispering his devotions. In front of me, the screen showed our Jumbo veering still further off course. As other passengers became similarly confused, the captain made an announcement. ‘Because of air-related incidents in New York and Washington, United States air space has been closed.’ Apparently, our flight was too far over the Atlantic to turn back. Instead of Chicago, the plane was to be diverted to Canada.

The small screen in front of me could not disguise the vastness of Canada. I felt the wedding rings burning a hole in my pocket. In the end, we were fortunate to find ourselves diverted to Montreal. Later flights were to be scattered to the outer reaches of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.

A COUNTRY UNDER ATTACK

Not until the plane touched down were we allowed to use mobile phones and get ourselves up to speed on the Twin Towers catastrophe. ‘Are you on the ground?’ our son shouted heatedly. ‘Are you on the ground?’ He had seen newsreels reporting that the Pentagon was treating every plane as a potential hi-jacked missile and stood finger-on-the-trigger ready to bring anything down.

The mood was sombre. Each of us was aware that our own situations were nothing compared to the enormous tragedy unfolding in the States. Montreal Airport was eerily deserted but for the heavily armed guards. Every incoming plane was being treated as suspicious. Before we could enter the terminal building, we were required to step through a disinfectant trough—a weirdly inapposite reminder that Foot and Mouth was the UK’s disease du jour.

At the British Airways desk all was confusion as passengers were ferried to hotels and guesthouses around Montreal. The U.S. propaganda machine was already in full throat. Despite the crisis, U.S. air space would be open within hours they claimed. Consequently, BA said they hoped to complete our journey the next day. But the next day came and went. And so, we learned, had our Jumbo. Flown back to the U.K., empty.

PLANES, TRAINS, AND AUTOMOBILES

We had just 36 hours to make the wedding. The false hope of U.S. air space reopening had cost us a day by which time the stock of hire cars in Montreal had been exhausted. We juggled our options. Amtrak perhaps? Not a chance. A Greyhound bus? Booked solid. No plane, no train, no bus, and no car. That left.... trucks. ‘Trucks?’ said my wife. Not having shared my hitch-hiking days she could be excused for looking bemused. ‘And what do truckers do?’ I said, ‘they listen to radio.’

She watched as I scanned a list of radio stations and tried to detect a trucker vibe in the branding. Hard Rock Dinosaur Radio hadn’t started up yet. Boom FM sounded promising, but sadly only in French. CBC Public Broadcasting? Too talky. Radio Shalom? Something of a long shot. So, I asked Radio CFCF (Canada’s First, Canada’s Finest) to step up to the plate.

The jocks at CFCF loved our sob story. Two hapless Brits marooned in Montreal. Ordinary folk trapped in extraordinary circumstances. They cast it out over the airwaves like a colourful lure to catch a Chicago-bound trucker and reeled in.... absolutely nothing. Not a peep. Desperate for a heart-warming denouement they wanted to keep trying, but I'd given up hope. 'That's it, we're not going to make the wedding.'

FOUR WHEELS, SIX PASSENGERS

Cue the tears and tantrums. 'We can't miss our son's wedding,' said the groom's mother. 'Besides we've got the rings.'

'But we've tried everything.'

'Everything except the obvious.'

'What's that?'

'A taxi,' she said.

'A taxi? Chicago's a thousand miles away!'

'No it isn't, it's 850, I've looked it up.' Now and then I've had nightmares involving a taxi-meter and a traffic jam, but this was of a different order. 'It's a 17-hour trip. If we set off now we can make it,' she reckoned.

'Hold on, hold on....' But she was off out of the door, leaving me to contemplate remortgaging the house.

Unknown to me, while I had been trying to hitch a lift from a Chicago-bound trucker she had been mixing with other stranded BA refugees. 'It's fixed,' she said. 'We're sharing a taxi with a lovely American couple and a young man. The car will be outside in 15 minutes.'

'A driver plus five passengers and a heap of luggage in one taxi?' I protested.

To be fair it was the vehicle like no other. A Citroen CX 25 Estate, the sort that rears up and down on its hydro pneumatic suspension giving the sensation of travelling in a waterbed on wheels. Even so it was a squeeze—a squeeze that left one of us sitting in a small backward-facing seat up against the tailgate. No prizes for guessing who my wife volunteered to sit there. After all the taxi was 'our' idea. Eight-hundred and fifty miles going backwards in a baby chair. What was not to like?

Thankfully, Emile, our driver, was not only a man of few English words, but also sensitive enough to place his beret over the meter reading. Less promisingly, in his entire life he had never once ventured beyond the Montreal city limits. Assuming no hold-ups and a minimum of pee and petrol stops, he was now embarking on a 12-hour drive to the U.S./Canada border.

A COUPLE FROM BARRINGTON

As the miles and hours ticked by, our American fellow travellers kept our spirits buoyant with expressions of optimism which at times they did not always feel. When we reached Windsor, four miles or so shy of Detroit, we had to part company with our indefatigable taxi driver. For us, another five hours of travel lay ahead in a hire car driven by our now lifelong American friends. For Emile, it was a long and lonely haul back to Montreal with only his biggest-ever-tip for comfort.

And to cut a long story short...we got there, with a couple of hours to spare and in no mood for more complications such as those favoured by rom-com film-makers. There had been no flat tyre drama to wind things up, no lost luggage, no last-minute wardrobe malfunction, or last-ditch race to the doors of the Tivoli Theatre.

The happy couple exchanged their vows and much-travelled rings and the Wurlitzer organ rose splendidly to the occasion. And we....? We were saddle-sore, but thankful that amid the overarching tragedy and tumult of events we could count ourselves among the lucky ones.

Editor's Note: The American couple referenced are Barrington residents Jamie and John Curry, both who have valued their 20-year friendship with Carole and Peter Gibbs. A handful of visits in England have followed, as well as a special guest appearance here in Barrington by their daughter Ruth and her children. U

Peter Gibbs is an English television script writer, and a former cricketer who played first-class cricket for Oxford University from 1964 to 1966, and for Derbyshire from 1966 to 1972.

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