

IF YOU LIKE COFFEE
YOU'LL LOVE

JAVASCOTIA



a novel by
Benjamin Obler

Javascotia
by
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I *A Great Hunger*

I have a great hunger for coffee.

Already I had done some work, informally, a portion of it, at the hotel, where I had a cup of coffee with breakfast. Breakfast was a slightly unpalatable surreal medley of fried meats, grains and vegetables arranged decorously on a plate, which I tapped with my fingernail to see if it had been fried too. My appetite and attention were devoted to the coffee, though. Foremost, it was watery, as if the grounds had been sponge-bathed, rather than thoroughly doused, soaked or steeped. And that was on the presumption that this cup had in fact been made from grounds – the flavor was stale, dangerously close to the artificiality of rehydrated freeze-dried crystals. I hate artifice, but I hadn't brought my notebook down, so didn't jot anything. This was a kind of rehearsal for the habits of my work. Even as practice, it was strangely satisfying to feel the encroachment of order, the anticipation of beginning a work-day, of daylight resuming its traditional role of dictator. But I tried not to get ahead of myself, something I often did. Carson himself had insisted I take the first day or two to recover from jet-lag, get acclimatized, buy maps, find an apartment. Or 'flat', as of course they call it here. The prospect was quite appealing – a strange concept: me, Melvin Podgorski, waking at seven, showering (showering!), dressing in creased slacks and punching in to work.

Well, almost punching in. With my new job, I didn't have a time clock, *per se*. It was more of an honor system. They could hardly monitor me from Chicago, four thousand miles across the western hemisphere. My weekly reports would show if I'd been keeping up – the dress code and schedule were really psychological policies. Carson expected the same level of professionalism in his field agents as the folks in headquarters. Punctuality, manners, civility – all the regular corporate blandness. Yet when I spoke with

Klang, who was to be stationed in London, before our departure, he seemed confused at my mention of borrowing money from my parents just to buy khakis and shirts. He didn't seem to know what I was talking about, not only why I was short on funds, but why I was overhauling a wardrobe for this non-office job, as if Klang hadn't been given the same set of guidelines for his London stint. Had Carson only given *me* these orders? Only given me this speech about representing the company, about presenting myself, looking professional? Did Carson have any reason to suspect me of falling out of line, of taking advantage and slacking off, such that he'd deliver me a special sermon?

In a word, yes. He had every reason to suspect I would be a complete fuck-up. For starters, my resumé had a year-long gap of unemployment, going back to the previous fall, when I'd quit Nexis Corporation, the only reputable company I'd been with. On top of that, the position was only remotely related to market research: I'd been doing data entry and customer support. Just beef up your qualifications, people told me. Everyone does it. Well, I tried that, but on the barren meadow of my career, my beefed-up items looked bloated, elephantine. Even I couldn't believe the things I'd made up. In the end, I stood on the truth, listing even a job driving forklift in a warehouse. My references were spotty. There was James, the fast-talking innovator who'd hired me at Nexis, and subsequently had nothing to do with me. And there was Greg Esposito, a cohort from the *Wynton High Gazette*, the high-school newspaper where I'd been staff photog. But I hadn't heard from Greg in a while and had to list his last-known number, which whenever I called rang and rang, dead as dead can be. My own contact info was no better – different addresses on my cover letter and driver's license, which kind of worried me, since the HR manager, in the pre-interview, said she'd be running a routine background check. (A vehicle violation in Arizona came to mind, though it may have been waived.) Everything about me was rag-tag. The suit I wore to the interview, resurrected from confirmation and graduation, bespoke an outworn past life. My newly acquired spare tire strained over the waistline. Blue-grey sacks

sagged beneath my eyes. It was yet another instance where the primary struggle reveals itself as an unburying. And how I abhorred it. Unburying from surface realities, from the horrible truth of visual impressions, tearing through the shroud of statistics and factoids to say, Look! Here's me, get to know me, give me a chance! I can do this job! I'm the man!

Well, I had pulled it off somehow. Despite not expecting to be hired on my qualifications, now here I was in the Glasgow Hilton putting breakfast on the tab of Plunkett Research Company of Elgin, IL. I had a corporate Visa issued in my name, with a \$10,000 credit line. It was to be tightly monitored, I was told, and excepting initial set-up expenses, for use only in extreme emergencies. I was enjoying the security of a six-month contract on overseas assignment in a field in which I had zero experience, with possibility of renewal or reassignment on completion and subject to review. I was looking down the throat of not only a full-fledged, above-the-board, upstanding professional life but the possibility of promotion, none of which would have been possible, say, a year prior. Melvin Podgorski, dubious divorcee, coffee connoisseur, slurping slacker, rudderless rogue – draft dodger if the call comes. I to whom the very thought of a set alarm clock is as ludicrous and inconceivable as bedding down beside a bomb with a lit fuse, was now facing the end of afternoon mornings (my cherished oxymoron), the solitude, listlessness, money-borrowing, scrounging, loafing, tennis shoes, ripped jeans, shaving weekly to save the blades. On this precipice and admiring the view.

I was proud, but I wouldn't say I was puzzled. I couldn't be. No one should be shocked to feel a craving for the end of their depravity. It was only when I finished my cup of coffee and caught my mind thinking in Plunkett Research Corporation terms, of flavor, quality, price, service, ratings sheets (form 27G, of which I had plenteous photocopies in my briefcase), when it struck me – the vast gulf between my past associations and my present circumstances. That is, the incredible number of mugs of black coffee I had brewed in careful measurements in the shoddy faux-woodgrain kitchen of my bachelor's apartment, how many rings of

last dregs I had stared into, cupped my hands around on lonely afternoons. How many I had savored, flipping through photo albums with feigned nostalgia and biting confliction, both my black and white prints and vacation snapshots (Arizona, as mentioned). How many I had slurped over the classifieds, deciphering their esoteric abbreviations meant to alienate those not in the know. The hypocrisy of them, supposed to be tools of convenience, springboards to bargains and futures, but in actuality serving only the initiated. All promise secreted away with code. What madness! For apartments, BR (bedroom), N/S (non-smoker), CLG FN (ceiling fan); for cars, HI MI (high mileage), PS PW (power steering, power windows), BO (best offer); for personals, SWPF (single white – what? Protestant? pregnant? preposterous? – female) for friendship and POSS LTR (possible long-term romance). All of which I needed: a new, association-free pad; a vehicle in which to traverse the pedestrian-unfriendly avenues of Hargrove and greater Chicago (my Honda had departed along with my ex-wife, Margaret); a job; and a fucking lay. Though, to be honest, this last I wasn't that keen on extending myself for. And none of these I could afford on the slender budget of my self-worth. None of these I could muster the will to earn.

These were my remembrances of that American elixir, that bitter pick-me-up, the true breakfast of champions. And they were sour. In the black grounds, in the smell of roasted beans, in the violently crepitant, manic whirl of the grinder, in the sight of the stray bean on the countertop, its little oval mound and symmetrical folds cruelly resembling a vagina, in the cooling of the tap and the ritualistic measuring of water along the even-numbered scale of 2–12, in the fingering of a cluster of #4 recycled paper filters (cheaper), trying to thumb off, as you do with paper plates, the perfect thickness of just one, in the volcanic *POOF* of the first douse of water onto the heated coils, in the tired waiting, the shuffling of bare feet on dusty tile floor, hands in pajama-pants pockets, in the pupil adjustment of curtain opening, in the mirror avoidance of morning. In the entire ritual, especially in the accumulation of black syrupy drips and the spread of the scent around the room,

were the filaments of desolation, reminders of loss, the oppressive shadow of a new day.

New days at that time meaning twelve maybe sixteen hours of depression, an unringing phone, the catcalls of afternoon talk-show audiences filling my apartment like the bleats of hungry chickadees, a kind of penitential soundtrack drowning out undesirable notions – the terror of answering to those who expected more from me, answering for my sins, my lust, my greed, my sloth; brain-voices scrounging for excuses, clamoring for answers, concocting reasons I was skeptical of myself. Sure, occasionally the phone rang. *What are you gonna do, Melvin?* Friends who wanted to help but could only do so much. On these days, a cup of java was the only hope for a decent start. And the whole sad spectacle carried on through evening when, my neighbors returning from work in their shiny new VW Jettas, I would have breakfast, toast and a fried egg, and into the sweet closure of obligation when night fell and the offices were shut – too late to call on that ad – all accompanied by half-pot after half-pot, the supply of clean mugs exhausted and started again from the top, like a pathetic four-man batting lineup, on through jitters and dehydration, bloating, gas and unspeakable sessions on the toilet, a burger put down, a carton of milk chugged, laying down a fresh tarp of high pH on which to pour more of my acidic, diuretic friend, coffee. Past that last landmark, midnight, when all clock hands reach up to the sky like a prayer, when I'd let the worrying stop, safe from the harassment of friends wanting to help, when the logic of loneliness had expired. If no one calls after midnight, you can blame the late hour. Night was when the offenses committed against my family were less apparent, when the unsightliness of my choices and actions was draped in the merciful blanket of dark, punctuated by stars. Black in the sky and black in my cup.

But Glasgow was nothing like this. And I not yet nothing, but *less* like the *II* was then. So in the airy dining room with its paneled walls, fancy molding, regal carpet, and gold chandelier – all so British! – when I happily replaced a demure white ceramic tea cup with gilt-edged rims into the matching saucer, having gulped its

contents of paltry and tepid yet welcome coffee before it had even cooled, the skein of jet-lag on my skin; having completed this familiar act of consumption and having thought only of the wholesome satisfaction I found in the anticipation of work, I laughed. Aloud. It was glee. Uncanny glee. At that moment, my own situation astounded me to the point of hilarity. But it wouldn't be funny to others, and in an unusually adroit reflex, I disguised the outburst by transitioning straight into a call for the check. I raised my hand – forgetting this was not grade school – and called 'Ma'am!' I cleared my throat. 'Miss!' My server came, thankfully showing no evidence she had heard my guffaw, her eyes reflecting what I already sensed was particularly British brand of reservation and patience, and I presented the Plunkett Research Corporation Citibank Visa card. (I wasn't about to sweat my first corporate expense, though I did note that this 'wee brekkie', as I'd learn to call it, with its hot tomatoes and black sausages, ran near to thirty bucks after conversion.) When I signed, she said, 'Cheers.' It was a bit early for a drink, I thought, so I replied thank you and sauntered with elation through the revolving door and out onto Sauchiehall Street.

2 *Snapshots*

I had my camera with me. I was under orders from my family to send photos, and figured I should get some taken right away, because by the time I got them developed and mailed people would be wondering whether I was alive or dead. My Aunt Jane had told me, based on corresponding with a London friend, that the Royal Mail was notoriously slow, saying it took two or three weeks for a letter to 'cross the pond'.

Generally, I am not a nostalgic person. Among the boxes I had hauled to my parents' suburban garage in Wynton, Illinois, for storage, only one little Xerox-paper box contained mementos. Trinkets, hockey-team patches (we won state when I was freshman on the bench), Margaret's garter from our senior prom, old notes passed in class, postcards, a form letter of congratulations from President Carter for winning a spelling bee. Anyway, only a few photos. I'm not big on memorializing or marking occasions in this manner; it cheapens them. Snapshots are just that, snapshots, when what is really needed to know a thing is a study. Perhaps my marriage suffered under this creed: I have very few photos commemorating my years with Margaret. But my memory is strong.

But to be clear, that's not to say I'm not a photo-taker. I'm no expert, but I dabble. I got my first manual SLR at sixteen, and learned print-making as an unofficial apprentice to the editor of the high-school paper. Later it was my shots of the wrestler's pin, my careful framing of a proud Principal Mullroy beside his '25 Years of Service' plaque, which graced its front pages. Free periods were spent in the library poring over books on Paul Evans and Margaret Burke-White, and the *Time-Life* annuals, of course. I was the photographer for the *Gazette* all through the prison sentence known as High School. Then, as a senior, licensed to drive, Margaret and I

would go downtown, and I'd shoot black and whites of the Sears and J. Hancock towers, the river, and men in Greek Town carving lamb off the spit, the aisles of imported almonds, dried pineapple rings and shapely olive-oil bottles. It annoyed Margaret that I'd expose a \$4 roll on strangers and inanimate foodstuffs but had no interest in posing her by landmarks and the Fendi purses she cooed at in the shop windows along Michigan Avenue. Glitz and photo-album stuff rubbed me the wrong way. So fake, so staged. Like a half-truth. I didn't want to do to Margaret what family snapshots had done to Mr and Mrs Podgorski: always capturing the forcedness of Mr P's smiles, the disappointment in my mom, yet her determined cheer. How full were our family albums with birthday-party shots in which Mother's chagrin played on her visage, the guests' appreciation for the cakes and streamers and activities falling far short of her investment.

Those trips downtown. Me shooting, she shopping. Expectations of coupledness's rewards. Narrow expectations. One time we fought – about restaurants and parking and walking, ostensibly, though this was only a glaze over the real substance. I remember realizing that what Margaret wanted was to go through the motions of this day – young lovers downtown – in some prescribed way, with all the set scenes like birthday-party props. Maybe she had in mind Matthew Broderick and his girlfriend in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, which was a hit around that time. But I wasn't zany and adventurous or clever or doting, and she grew upset. She didn't like my inattention. When I questioned her motives and said this wasn't like her, she had to argue against her own nature to remain right. I made the mistake of pointing this out, and the rest was ugly.

My photographic attentions were always outwardly directed, to capture and claim something about the world, not myself or the dysfunction of the Podgorski clan. Snapshots were snapshots, but photography was selfless observation, sanctioned theft. In Chicago that day, my lens had been trained on a toothless guy hawking chains and watches out of his coat. Had it been inward, I would have emerged from the darkroom with evidence of the

ways Margaret and I, not even married yet, were already taking on marriage's ugliest aspects. Pasted-on happiness, the get-it-over-with grin. And that was something I wasn't ready to see yet, though I would in time.

Besides all that, in Glasgow I did not regard myself as a tourist. Tourists tour. They do not live with their parents. I didn't want to look like one, and I didn't want to be one, now that I had reached, finally, at long last, this blessed UK outpost. I wanted to get some shots, put the camera away, and blend in.

Yes, I had performed that death-defying feat, the stuff of twenty-something nightmares across America, the scourge of adult life: I moved back into my parents' house. I returned to 8460 Meadow Prairie Lane, the yellow rambler, one-car garage and backyard with chainlink fence, lawn dotted with patches of dead-brown turf where the family cocker spaniel, Mitzy, laid her *merde* bombs. I was hired for the position in early July, and there was a month and a half wait before I departed, time to put in notice on my apartment (goodbye faux-grain panels and good riddance), get the final phone, electric and gas bills and pay them off. Time to get my ducks in a row, as my father would say.

To sleep on your old single bed, toes hanging off the end, revisiting the same frame creaks, poky springs and musty smells that accompanied your sweetest nights, when – wearing Pac-Man pajamas – you awaited the sandman thinking of nothing more worrisome than cartoons and a new baseball glove. The same streetlight shadows and furniture shapes that you beheld as a pubertic teen, your shinbones aching with growth, strange visions of Leah Anderson undressing atop a desk in algebra class. And of course there are the uncontrollable, gratifying and shameful nocturnal ejaculations. All of it – that room, those closet doors, the wallpaper now looking horribly tasteless, the diamond-shaped light fixture, the carpet beaten down by footsteps – it gives you the same feeling you get walking the halls of your old junior high. The lockers are short and narrow. You're puzzled that the combination dials are below waist height when you recall having prudently shielded yours with your chest. The ceiling lingers mere inches

above your head. You are certain that it has all been reduced, not you enlarged, the whole building put through a shrink cycle, in size and importance.

This is the feeling you get in your folks' old house. And despite the obscure unreality of it, I'd recommend it. It's like a demented theme park. It's a free drug trip, an altered state without the illicit connotations. A sojourn into the past can do a person some good. If nothing else, it'll really get your ass in gear.

Of course, there are qualifications. The experience would probably not be beneficial for someone whose family home is their own personal Auschwitz. My stay at *L'Hôtel de Podgorski* provided some valuable perspective, but I'm speaking here as a person who was not beaten, sexually abused, whose parents were, to the best of my understanding, happily – though certainly not always blissfully – married. A person who didn't cry himself to sleep, pillows held tight over the ears, muffling screams of anger and smacks of fist on face. I didn't shiver under a threadbare blanket, didn't share a cot with four siblings – none, in fact. Didn't grow dizzy in my slumber from the fumes of dope smoke, didn't keep a bat under my pillow with which to greet likely bandits. My lullabies were not gunshots or ghetto blasters, or trailer-park traffic or hippie commune campfire anti-guerrilla-warfare acoustic sing-alongs. I wasn't strangled with rosary beads or whipped into penitence, I didn't go to bed with fingers bleeding from fretting the neck of grandpa's violin under forced practice, in search of some war-torn retribution. Sleep for me was not a release from the exhaustion of chopping wood or scrubbing floors. I had no evil stepmother, no Sister Wendy Rulerwhacker, no one called 'Mom's boyfriend' or 'Dad's girlfriend', no imprisoned half-sibling. The door of 8460 Meadow Prairie Lane was not rapped upon by repo men, social workers, sheriffs, or the ATF. And, likewise, there was no Jeeves the Butler, no Spanish maid, no befriended 5th Avenue doorman in topcoat. Which is all to say that my upbringing was entirely MOTR – middle of the road. Midwestern, nuclear. If my childhood was a color, it would be gray.

During my August layover I found nothing traumatic on a

clinical level, no deeply painful memories, no flashbacks of blocked-out, repressed molestations and the like. It was a stay at the house of the past, the place where I grew up; there was some fondness lurking around and a lot of dust settled. Much more than you'd expect to fall during a less-than-two-year absence. While there, I felt some resentment, some regret, and a lot to be thankful for. There were a few nooks where I stood, particular spots, like some kind of temporal vacuum in a sci-fi movie, where the organization of the walls, the furniture, and the fall of light through a window awakened something distantly unsettling, where it seemed my former self had made a departure or suffered an adolescent infliction – my ghost still there, waiting for a bandage, a kiss, and a pat on the head. But what can you do but wander the house and place yourself in an archway or at a vantage point where the view is more picturesque? Indeed, the nicest moments of my stay were of this nature, spent with my mother, looking across the backyard at a copse of Norway pine and maples at sunset, which we could agree was beautiful and right, the house itself and all it stood for out of our periphery, our focus, and perhaps our realm of understanding.

So, speaking as a person who needed to save money to go abroad, I'd recommend it. As I strolled down Sauchiehall Street, my Pentax slung over my shoulder, now a good distance from Meadow Prairie Lane, I reflected on that and afforded myself some much-needed confidence that my game plan was on target. It was a step back that led to two forward. Fruitful. I had driven into the city and attended training sessions at Plunkett Research, met Klang there, and four or five others who were headed to other posts outside the UK – around the globe, in fact. I had looked over briefs from Carson about my duties, filled out my W4, checked my belongings against a list provided by Plunkett of recommended things to bring, about culture shock and how my American hair drier would blow sky high if plugged into the 240v wall socket of my future Scottish flat. I had even bought a marketing textbook from a secondhand store and sat on the back patio in the Illinois August heat nursing glasses of iced cold-press French Roast and

skimming it, the numbing, clinical language, looking for basic concepts and terms which Carson had doled out in his instructions so I could convey – nod knowingly – some glimmer of comprehension. I was diligent and responsible. I prepared, though not without interruption. In our neighborhood my reappearance had been noticed (reversing in and out of the driveway in Dad's Buick), and the neighborly word had spread. Mrs Brown approached from the proximity of her backyard, where her shrubs were in sudden need of pruning. She was a placid woman who wore knitted sweaters and an Illinois pompadour, perky of spirit despite her saggy eyes laden with Kool Menthol toxins. She said she had heard I was going overseas, to Scotland. Well, Lo and Behold! She had been there herself many years ago.

'My maiden name is MacDougall,' she had said, leaning on the chainlink fence, Mitzy, enfeebled by age, unenthusiastically sniffing her feet, where once she would have yapped and leapt with a spaniel's insatiability and probably hurdled into Mrs Brown's arms. 'Ed and I went to the Highlands and saw the old family castle, what's left of it. I looked up my ancestry and made a family tree. My great-grandfather came over to Cape Breton – that's in Canada – in the 1930s. So we went and visited Oban, where he came from. It's a beautiful country. So green, and all the villages so quaint.' It seemed like Mrs Brown had been longing to tell someone this for years, yearning in all her heart for a person in Wynton to pass into her range bringing relevance to her memories. I sat in a lawn chair, my thighs and back itching with sweat, blocking the sun's glare with my hand. I drained my drink and swished the ice around, held the cool glass against my forehead, waiting for a kind moment to retreat indoors.

'You must go to Urquhart Castle,' she said. 'It's just lovely. And stay in a B&B. The *Scotch* are such dear people. And take lots of pictures. You'll wish you had when you get back.'

'Yes, I've heard it's very scenic,' I told her, standing up. 'But I'll be working in Glasgow. I don't know how much traveling I'll be able to do. Probably not much. I expect to be extremely busy.'

'Fair bit of rain, though,' she announced, her voice shifting into

a light brogue, as if that were a natural consequence of her reminiscence.

‘Yes, I’ve heard that too.’ It’s hard to be short with an elderly lady steeped in nostalgia while your dog appears to be navigating an angle in the chainlink through which she can piss on her slippers.

And more reports came in just like Mrs Brown’s. Wouldn’t you know it, everyone had a bridge partner, co-worker, dentist, neighbor or drycleaner who had dipped their toes in bonnie, bonnie Loch Lomond! Suddenly all my aunts and uncles were Rick Steeves, though they got a few things wrong. *Edinburgh Castle is fantastic. Pet the sheep in Skye for me. Are you going to eat haggis? Send me some haggis. You must try the haggis. Whatever you do, don’t eat the haggis, it’s cooked in:* (insert here all the misconceptions and old wives’ tales) *a sheep’s butt, a goat’s stomach, a pig’s carcass. It’s made from brains and snouts. No, it’s offal, which is the hooves and organs ground up.* Equally ill-informed stereotypes were thrown about in regards to whiskey, bagpipes, kilts and what is or isn’t worn under them.

Now, mind you, all these reports had to be taken with a grain of salt, because they arrived through the network of familial communication, which is bound by a tradition of deceit. It’s a Podgorski heirloom. You see, my parents’ siblings, my aunts and uncles and their families, are spread about the Midwest – Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, Iowa. There’s one stray in California. Reports of well-being are shared every few months, passed from state to state and then along intrastate lines. And the thing is, these communications are notoriously biased, one-sided, padded as a Bellevue cell. My mother – Mrs P., as I usually call her – since she retired from teaching elementary school five years ago, has more time and brain space to devote to the family gossip. This permissible white lying, you find it anywhere. It’s this sort of thing, your standard all-American parental bragging. And then the petty mudslinging follows, the slide into surreptitious supposition. ‘Oh,’ Mrs P. would say, ‘Aunt Lizzy says David’s studying hard. I sure hope his grades aren’t slipping. I mean, do you think he’s a good

student? He doesn't seem all that bright to me.' From there it is not a far stretch for her to surmise that drugs or ADD is involved. However, I don't doubt that the same thing happens on the other end when reports of me leave Wynton. But it's all done out of love and concern, so I accept it. It is the *modus operandi* for the Podgorskis, spread as they are around these central plains and cornfields, connected by tenuous phone lines, safe to interpret behind the distance of the US postal service and the infrequent, at most annual, holiday road trips.

My father, for his part, is less malicious. He's a different animal, takes his jabs at himself, privately. He doesn't take part in the slandering, and tries to tame Mom's gossipy imagination with gentle scolding. 'Rose, really,' I can hear him say, in his kindest voice. Occasionally, though, he cannot deny the likelihood of my mother's assumptions.

'Richard, come on,' my mother will say. 'Your brother Mark has been through treatment. You think Alex wouldn't try a reefer or whatever his friends are passing around? Like father, like son.'

'Well, no, Mark hasn't always set the best example,' he'd concede.

Mr P., as I call him, tempers his obvious malice. He's not crazy about his family, but he's resigned to them. He seems to regard them with his scientist's forbearance, like he would at work studying the results a trial, hoping for one defining success. This idea has stuck with me; it remains at the center of my understanding of this man who taught me how to swing a bat, carried me on his shoulders, read me my first books, but who otherwise is an enigma. I once thought I'd go to film school, and conceived of a screenplay based on him. In it, the protagonist is a scientist, like Mr P. All day, he tweaks chemical recipes for delicate but durable plastics. He binds and blends otherwise benign substances into helpful applications. He creates non-toxic adhesives, long-lasting but noncorrosive polymers. We see him at the lab in his white coat, amid beakers, Petri dishes, proton microscopes: ordered, controlled, the master of cause and effect, predicting outcomes, controlling small fates. Every ingredient added and subtracted can be measured, traced,

quantified, reproduced. When he hangs up his coat, however, leaves the building and drives home, this applicability of his pure reason disintegrates. In his personal life, his family life, he cannot make connections. The arbitrariness of emotions agitates him. Rattled, he lashes out with small cruelties, further confirming his belief in the heart's capriciousness. He's oblivious of the effects of his actions, can't understand why his kids and wife are repelled away from him, though they are no different than particles charged with his insensitivity and bristly bearing. The next morning, he eagerly returns to the chemical company, to his insular lab, soothed again among the cold, tractable implements.

All this is to say that the system of Podgorksi linkage is far from ideal. But if it's anything, it's consistent and time-honored, and it went into full swing with my Scotland adventure upcoming. When I was hired by Plunkett Research Corporation, Mrs P. launched a full-scale briefing. In fact, she began the media blitz the night Mr P. came home from 3M with the printed flier he'd obtained through some colleague or other avenue – the flier that advertised Plunkett Research's job fair and their need for market research consultants. How vindicated I felt! Worthless classifieds! All their cryptic, in-the-know acronyms had gotten me nowhere. The position that would prove fruitful for me totally circumvented the classifieds: I checked, there was no public listing for these Plunkett positions. That only confirmed the old trope: *It's all who you know*. Then Mrs P. issued a second round of press releases when Carson scheduled my interview, as if my being hired were a foregone conclusion, a sure thing, a dead lock. I guess a mother's hope knows no bounds. She called Uncle Bill, wrote her sister Elizabeth, my Aunt Lizzy, telling them of the serendipity of it all, how the job has to do with coffee, and I'm a big coffee drinker. A godsend, she called it. Our prayers have been answered.

When letters and calls came back in response, Mrs P. dropped her church fundraiser envelope-stuffing or her baking – even with me and my appetite out of the house, she continued, as if by command of some unalterable wiring, to bake cakes and pies that were never all eaten. She would scurry to find me in the house,

wherever I was, planning the arrangement of my luggage (should I pack any short-sleeve shirts, any shorts?) or boning up on my job on the back patio, and she'd share these nuggets on haggis and kilts and castles.

She didn't always know what they were talking about. She had never even heard of Glasgow, and even had to ask, to double check, when Carson awarded me my placement: 'Scotland? That's in the north of England, isn't it?' I could visualize the cogs cranking there, her brain trying to sift through, trying to reach a disused folder containing geography's faded shapes. Let's face it, there really hasn't been that much else to bring Scotland to the forefront of the average American's mind, has there? There was Lockerbie, but all that did, from this remote viewpoint, was create a distorted clash of nations: green Scotland and sandy Libya. The aftermath on the ground, roofless homes, a crane lifting a shattered fuselage, men in police-neon jackets. Footage of the square-jawed Gaddafi denying involvement. In places like Wynton you heard, 'Are you safe on an airliner? Tune in at ten to find out.' There was the occasional half page in a national magazine on Silicon Glen. The juxtaposition of Midlothian and the microchip. I myself had little more to go on when all these questions and comments came in from relatives, but their presumptuousness annoyed me. One factor was common to them all: they each addressed my upcoming venture as if it were a sight-seeing tour. Which it was not. It bothered me, made me even more impatient and dismissive of the input of these rarely seen blood relatives, more than I would normally be. Mainly because they had missed the point. No one said, *Congratulations*. No one said, *Way to go, sounds like Mel's got a real future there. That's great*. No. Nor did anyone pick up on the altruism of my cause. These were people – *the people*, in fact, *the very demographic* – who frequented drive-thru coffee huts, who bought lattes, double half-cafs, who had, in recent years, propelled the success of franchise coffee chains – Burback's, most notably. And though Plunkett would not tell me which particular megaglomerate it had contracted me for, because my data might then be biased, might subliminally, subconsciously, or even deliberately lean toward favorable results

for them, in some hope that it would yield Plunkett and thus myself more money, I guess. ('It's the principal of the double blind,' Dad explained. Oh, right.) But what I knew was, this was a company that had peddled coffee with such success and had so infiltrated American cities, downtowns and strip malls alike, that it was considering expanding into the British market. Clearly, it was one of the big ones that you see in every town big enough to support a cinema, the place that Aunt Jenny gave a buck sixty to every morning on her way to her Milwaukee office and would miss dearly if she were ever deprived of the luxury. The one all the Podgorskis raced to, in Ames, in Indianapolis, in Springfield, and surely out there in San Mateo – raced to without a second thought whenever they needed a boost, a hangover helper, a travel mugful, a Sunday-newspaper companion. And so here I was employing myself in the pursuit of information that would assess the beverage-consumption tendencies, the spending habits and tastes of the Brits, to see if the UK would be a suitable place for this facility. Let's face it, I would be researching, largely, the prospect of profitability, but there was also the question of bettering whatever society I might find in Britain by the addition of a more affordable (this was contestable), higher quality, quickly served coffee.

Did, then, my relatives ever mention any of these aspects of my future exploits? Like hell they did. They were fixated with the petty. Maybe it could be excused, since this was pre-information age. But it wasn't the Dark Ages. They possessed that Midwestern tendency to mock that which you do not understand born of a culture of T-shirt slogans and American flags, with their putative unflappability. Had I been going into space to study how cancerous tumors grow in zero gravity, they would have said, *Hey, I heard the moon's made of green cheese, bring me back a chunk*. Had I been embarking on a tour of the ocean floors in search of clues of primitive life that would give humankind a greater understanding of itself – would have placed the whole Podgorksi clan on the chain of all the universe's life forms – they would have joked, *Oh, are you going in a yellow submarine? Keep an eye out for the Octopus's garden in the shade*.

This is what you get in an America of spoon-fed impressions. Snapshots. CNN ran play-by-play of OJ fleeing in his white Bronco, asserting the truth of events through repetition, bestowing the 'event' with the importance of airtime – circular logic and circling helicopters. Innocent until proven guilty was thrown out the window, like so many ill-fitting gloves. Likewise, every account of Scotland available to the masses was that of a heather-strewn paradise and misty moors populated by buxom lasses in ripped bodices. To learn otherwise required effort; a world of comfortable impressions, and cozy denials, was more accessible. CNN never went off the air, so why get up or change the channel?

And so, on Sauchiehall Street, on my first day at work, strolling through what could be considered my office, the effect was twofold. On the one hand, my briefcase of 27G forms was a matter of personal pride to me, but the work was also a private pursuit, an undertaking driven by my unique appreciation of it. I could, and would, take it all the more seriously if no one else was going to. And, on the other, I was a little bitter. With the exception of my mother, who is unconditionally proud of and hopeful for me, the Podgorski family could not shed their impression of me as a deadbeat loser, and apparently were not willing to believe I could handle real responsibility or contribute something meaningful to society, even a foreign one. They thought I was on paid vacation, had been visited by the angel of cushy jobs, been hit with Plunkett's pity stick. And so they wanted tourist photos. They wanted snapshots of pipers and kilts, plowmen and pipe smokers and Highland cattle, hill and dale, glen and firth. Well, I decided, while shoving and dodging my way through the crowded cobblestone mall (not strip mall, but pedestrian mall), working my way to what on my map looked like the heart of downtown, the so-called City Centre, I wouldn't give them the satisfaction.