

Memories of Dispatch 1 - A foreigner arrives

Before we start we need to go to the beginning, to Day 1 of Week 2 of my life as a foreigner in Yemen.

I sit in a dilapidated cargo office at the international airport in the ancient city of Sana'a, on a mountain plateau some 2,000 metres above the sea, without a clue of what might await.

Some one million souls live in Sana'a, among the oldest inhabited cities on Earth: according to legend the city of one of Noah's sons, a time-warped capital known as the Pearl of Arabia Felix, a place that for centuries was closed to foreigners.

The only things I'm reasonably certain about on this warm morning is that both the Queen of Sheba and Osama bin Laden hail from around here, and I'm likely the only person in the country wearing a Team Canada cap.

On a wall is an already-dated poster advertising a regional airline. Pictured, as if looking through an airliner cockpit, are popular global destinations like New York's Statue of Liberty and the World Trade Center's Twin Towers.

"Fly with us and see the world," says the ad, innocuously. Nobody has bothered to replace it by this day, some six months after Sept. 11, 2001, that fateful day when a generation's defining moment crashed into our memories.

I'm waiting to collect my family's cargo sent from Canada. Over his shoulder a clerk wears a dirty mushadda, a red-and-white checkered shawl. He's pleasant, and proudly asks if he should write my form in English or Arabic.

"English," I say.

"Are you American?" he then asks.

"Canadian," I say.

He smiles and nods, "Canadian okay. Better than American."

The airline poster looms large again, and my mind wanders to a meaningful and memorable visit once had over an Easter weekend with a friend in New York City.

Before long a cargo manager tells me that I need to return to the office "tomorrow" as it's now closing. It's just 11:30 in the morning, I protest.

A stranger comes to help, and after some hours of paper shuffling, a dozen signatures, several dips into my pockets for dirty, worn Yemeni currency, my bins of personal belongings are released.

"I am the computer," is the parting comment from another clerk, at a last stop near the exit and loading bay, while he prints in a large ledger.

A Korean doctor friend, John, helps load my bins onto the rooftop of a beaten Toyota 4x4. John is still learning to navigate the English language, but he skillfully drives the load through the dusty and exhaust-filled streets of Sana'a.

Our vehicle meanders through strange scenes. There are goats, and women in head-to-toe, black baltos looking like walking bowling pins, and men walking bow-legged, wearing dirty white robes, those checkered mushaddas on their heads, and jambias, ceremonial daggers, around their waists. Some faces are worn as old maps, looking older than the average lifespan of a Yemeni man, which, so they say, is now 56 years.

It's obvious why this country has among the world's highest traffic death rates. There are apparently 14 streetlights in the capital. Looks like half don't work. Hundreds of other intersections operate on a kind of first-honk, first-drive basis. Vehicles, almost all old

white Toyotas, funnel through: wobbly cars, battered dubabs, or taxi vans, with cracked windshields and sliding doors left open, plus undersized and overloaded motorcycles with everyone aboard wearing dusty flip-flops but no helmets.

We reach home safely to Darling Doctor Wife. Jean is a Canadian obstetrician whose ever-growing heartbeat is to help save some of the many women in the developing world who die in childbirth, starting here in this Felix, or “Happy,” Arabia.

We live on a typical side-street. It’s paved coarsely, but like many roads, has no name. Sana’a also has no phone directory. Osama could be around the corner on another street with no name for all we know. Our apartment-flat is not posh: the ground-level of a typical multi-story Yemeni home. But it has a western-style flush toilet, and we’re thankful.

Please, come in.

Here in the front hall is where we’ll later put our big Canadian flag. And there, a rather striking photo of a shepherd girl holding a lamb from the nearby countryside. Around the corner, our office will have posters of Martin Luther King and his thoughts on freedom. It’s hung near our wall-to-wall world map.

There’s the stairs up to the landlord’s, “Dr.” Ali, a pharmacist with one wife and four kids.

This is the beginning of my life as a somewhat bewildered Canadian in Arabia. Soon, the Iraq War will break out. Also, soon, terrorism and death will pound on our door in a much more personal way. Joys will also come. This little flat will become the first home of our First Youngling.

Flash forward six years. This Scribe has had opportunity to write columns from not just the Middle East, but from Africa, and extra travels in Europe, South America and several provinces across Canada. Many are collected into what you hold in your hands.

Darling Doctor Wife and I now have Two Younglings. And while our world map still takes a wall in our study, it’s now located some 10 degrees west and 15 degrees south of Sana’a, in our current overseas home, in Africa, in the Kampala capital region of Uganda.

What has remained constant is something that my New York City friend told me during that past Easter visit, when he showed me the slums of Brooklyn where he grew up. “You have to look past what you see to know what it’s really like here.”

And so, I’m learning. Whether you’re in the slums of New York or in developing world corners like Sana’a or Kampala, or in the rich mansions of Beverly Hills, people are people. In this sense, we’re all travelers, at times meeting each other when our paths are fated to cross, but often not, often just looking, observing, maybe fearing each other.

In his autobiography *Up from Slavery*, American activist Booker T. Washington says this is our challenge, “to bring the strong, wealthy and learned into helpful touch with the poorest, most ignorant and humblest, and at the same time make one appreciate the vitalizing, strengthening influence of the other.”

My own cultural baggage and natural flaws, some critical journalistic inclinations and imperfect interpretive eye have kept me from doing this in its fullness.

But I hope that I can still put you in meaningful touch with important issues and themes, and more so, with people, fellow sojourners whom you would otherwise never see very closely: people who are different, but who are also like you and I, seeking purpose and value, maybe even joy, even while knowing life has trouble along the way.

It was all not supposed to be this way. When I left home as a rather unripe 20-year-old, I had planned to go to theological college. My Mennonite forefathers would have smiled. Instead I fell into journalism, a world of pictures and words, the so-called black art: spilling ink to paper – becoming a different kind of scribe, becoming ‘This Scribe’ – baptized into the ways of the newspaper, an old and venerable but very earthy type of organ.

So it was on this type of road less-traveled where I discovered this rich calling, and discovered it has married well with my heritage. If you want a better look into this part of my back-story, jump to the two commentaries *The Road to Hell* and *Dirty Feet*, and their following addendums.

Many of the 99 columns that make up the bulk of this book first appeared on the opinion pages of *The Hamilton Spectator*, among Canada’s more decorated newspapers, while most of the others ran in another regional newspaper, *The London Free Press*.

The addendums attached to some of these 99 windows weave a second journey. Some give more observations about Arabia and Africa, but most give This Scribe’s behind-the-scenes views, a biographical sketch: my family heritage and spiritual journey, some highlights from reporting in St. Thomas, Canada (an incarnation that preceded life as a foreign correspondent), and some notes about The Younglings and Darling Doctor Wife.

Throw in a truckload of humour and a pile of photos to help tell the story.

Your invitation, then, is to travel through these pages in order, or out of order in any direction you may find yourself wandering. But please do travel with expectation.

Because my hope is that this is more than just a pragmatic exercise in reading the ruminations of some Canadian journalist, but that it’s all entertaining, and relaxing: like you’re sitting on a proverbial bus, or maybe in a quieter place, in front of an open window with a fresh breeze blowing gently, able to pause every now and then, look out on your horizon and muse, “I enjoyed that. I really enjoyed that.”

Thomas Froese
March, 2008
Kampala, Uganda