A READER IN ITHAKA

"What do we owe a guest?
Welcome if he wishes to stay,
farewell if he wishes to leave."
Homer, *The Odyssey*

All my childhood long I was haunted by travel. My storybooks were full of them. Travellers and travel fascinated me, partly because every excursion promised a flight from the confines of my childhood days, partly because the outcome of the adventure was still in the future, on that last page where everything was possible. It seemed to me that no arrival was the true end of the story: Gulliver set off again after having returned from his travels and Alice, after waking, passed her dream on to her sister, whose dreamer she had become. Something in the very roundness of the world suggests that every journey is always to be continued.

A story I enjoyed as a child was that of Puss in the seven-league boots which allowed the creature to wander the earth regardless of seas or borders. Looking back, my life-long journies (like those of the booted cat) were taken step after seven-league step. After the Buenos Aires of my birth came Spain, because the ship that I took at the age of nineteen (the cheapest way of transport in those days) stopped in Algeciras; an invitation by a stranger who had known Kafka, led me to Paris; from Paris, London seemed like the obvious stop; austere immigration officials forced me to leave London and return to Paris; a translation of a Borges story into English prompted an invitation from an Italian publisher to come and work for him in Milan; the opening of a bookstore in France took me back once more to Paris; a client buying books for the Tahitian branch of Hachette offered me the chance to leave Europe and

settle in the South Seas as a publisher of travel books; the closure of the company, many years later, forced me to decide between setting up in Japan (where a printer had offered me a job), San Francisco (where the Tahitian company was planning to reopen) and Canada (where for aleatory reasons a book of mine had been published). Since I no longer wanted to work in an office but longed instead to try and make my living as a writer, I chose Canada. I was thirty-four years old.

Canada existed nowhere in my imagination before I got there. Canada had drifted, faint and unpretentious, through some of my reading: in an Atwood story, an essay by Northrop Frye, a chapter by Saul Bellow, or even more clearly and yet still unobstrusively in the Jalna saga that delighted my aunts or the biography of Graham Bell that sat in my father's library. But unlike England or Polynesia, Japan or France, Canada had failed to conjure up a solid landscape in my dreams. Rather, like one of those places whose existence we assume because of a name on a sign above a platform, glimpsed at as our train stops and then rushes on, the word "Canada" awoke no echoes, inspired no images, lent no meaning to my port of destination. Canada was the place in which my publisher had her office: nothing more.

I arrived with my family at Pearson Airport on the twenty-second day of October of the year 1982. My son had been born six weeks earlier. As if to rid himself of any small past he might have carried inside him and in order to begin afresh in this new world, his first act upon landing was to vomit on the carpet outside the immigration bureau.

Our earliest apartment was on George Street, off Queen Street East, opposite a garage that a few months later suddenly burst into

flames. It was a tiny place on the second floor of a narrow house with a cabin kitchen, a small living-room, a single bedroom in which the three children slept together and a miniscule mezzanine that doubled as second bedroom and my office. Through the children's window they could see the blue *M* of the Bank of Montreal Tower lit up at night so as to lend my eldest daughter the illusion that our family initial was emblazoned against the Toronto sky.

Slowly we began to claim the city's geography: the seedy yet welcoming second-hand stores on Queen Street, the (to us) impressive shopper's mosque of the Eaton Centre, the tree-lined streets of the Annex (that reminded me of my own street in Buenos Aires), the wonders of Harbourfront and the islands, Riverdale Park and its inner-city farm full of cows and chickens that would, a couple of years later, become our neighbours, once we had moved to Geneva Avenue, a few steps away from the ravine.

The city in which you grow up grows with you: the height of doors and windows changes as you change, and over the years you know, even if you no longer see them, the cracks and patches of colour that were once at the level of your eyes. There is one system of measures for the room in which you stepped out of your shorts into your long trousers, you graduated from games on the floor to games on the desk, you were promoted from early bed-hours to the time when at long last you were allowed to stay awake and have dinner with the grown-ups -- and a different one for that other room in which you enter full-formed, past all true transformation, as an adult in a world of adults. (When I managed to buy the house in Cabbagetown, after signing the papers and holding in my hand the document that apparently proved that the place was truly

mine, I stood for a long moment in the living-room, as if seeing my books and pictures and bits of furniture for the first time, feeling that they were, like myself, strangers in a strange land; and then, somewhat selfconsciously, I crouched down to the eye-level of a child and looked around me, after which I lay down on the wooden floor and looked up at the empty ceiling, and remembered how many times, when I was four or five, I had done exactly that, in order to see my room upside-down with nothing in it, a blank to fill with whatever I wanted, whatever I loved or whatever held my fancy.)

We all took to the city (and to Canada) in different ways. My daughters, who had spent their first years in Tahiti scuttling barefoot along the beach with packs of other children, would stubbornly kick off their unaccustomed shoes in a snowstorm and still, from time to time, wear a flower behind their ears. My son, however, almost immediately took to baseball in the summer, and in the winter to making snow angels or riding down the ravine slope on a large plastic disk, and later, of course, to hockey. I missed the café life I had known in Argentina and in Europe, the political discussions, even the adventurous uncertainty of the economy, the late dinners and the loud streets. Perhaps I did not really miss these things. Perhaps every newcomer senses the need to feel nostalgic, to lay before himself a photo album of that which he believes he has left behind. The faces may be hazy, the names only vaguely remembered, the voices dim, but he still thinks: "Things are not as good as they were under the reign of Cynara."

Both for myself and for my family, everything was unknown. My siblings in Buenos Aires had the same everyday references as their sons and daughters: they belonged to the same soccer club and read the same

comic strips, sang the same nursery rhymes and told the same jokes. I had to learn together with my children about zambonis and first bases, donuts and slurpies, about the dangers of licking a frozen metal pole and of jaywalking, about the TV children's host Mr Dressup and the hockey star Wayne Gretzky, as well as the names of the prime ministers and of the Canadian provinces *a mari usque ad mare*.

My children had little to compare the experience to (my eldest daughter was six when we arrived). I, however, felt constantly astounded by the relentless newness of it all. At the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, it is told that God led Moses from the Moabite plains to the mountaintops, and from there showed him the Promised Land that would one day belong to his children, but that Moses himself would never possess. There will always be some aspect, some occurrence, some word or event in this country I call now mine that suddenly pulls me back, forces me outside, if only for a moment, to see it once more with the eyes of a foreigner: a view from the land of Moab. This does not happen often, but it happens. For someone who has lived in the chaotic worlds of Argentina, France, Italy, Spain, French Polynesia, in all their ordinary mad behaviour, the civil awareness and tidy obedience of the Canadian citizen appears as a different and far more astounding madness. During my first few years in Canada there were moments that seemed utterly unreal:

Shortly after my arrival in Toronto, I was riding a streetcar down Queen Street in a blizzard. At one of the stops, a young man got in and showed his transfer ticket. The driver told him it was no longer valid and asked him to pay a new fare. The man refused. The driver insisted. At last, the man ripped off a handful of transfers from the driver's clip

and stormed off into the snow. The driver got up, told us he'd only be a minute and followed the man down the street. We waited quietly. Presently they came back accompanied by a policeman. The driver climbed back into his seat, and the policeman, turning the young man to face us, said to him in a stern but polite tone: "Now you apologize to these good people." And to my amazement, the young man did.

Friends of mine had a small daughter and, because both of them worked full time, decided to employ a Mexican *au pair*. Canadians are, by and large, terribly ill at ease with what we used to call in Argentina "domestic help". They are uncertain of what role to play as employers, how to behave, what to say. My friends decided that, in order not to show any class distinctions, they would treat the young woman as one of the family. They shared their meals with her, invited her to watch television with them in the evenings, asked her to join them when they went out with friends. One day, my mother, who had come over for a visit and had been kindly invited by my friends to lunch, followed the *au pair* into the kitchen and chatted away to her in Spanish. Suddenly, the young woman asked if she could beg a favour. "Of course," said my mother. "Please, *señora*, don't think I'm ungrateful. They are nice, they want me to eat with them, watch TV with them, go out with them after my work. But *señora*, I'm so tired. Could you please tell them to leave me alone?"

For a while, I tried writing scripts for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. One got produced, an episode in a series of stories on immigration, and I was asked to write another one. I suggested a story set among the Haitian taxi drivers in Montreal. My producer liked the idea but remarked that, since the theme was Haitian and I clearly was not, it

might be best to work with a writer from that country. I needed the money, I accepted, and was lucky enough to be paired with the Haitian novelist Dany Laferrière. The plot involved the racist owner of a taxi company and therefore required that the character blurt out a number of racist remarks. When we presented the first draft, the producer was horrified. "You can't use the word *nigger* on television!" "But the character is a racist," we argued. "That's what he would say." "Well, you can't use it. Why don't you find something else, less offensive?" "Like what?" we asked. "Oh, like 'coloured person'," suggested the producer. Dany's eyes sparkled. "OK," he said with a dangerous grin. And in the episode, the racist boss, furious at his black employee, seems to choke on the words before he splutters: "You...you... you.. coloured person!" The comic effect was stupendous.

But in fact, these astonishing episodes should not have astonished me. Civil manners irrespective of the occasion, utmost consideration for what the Germans laconically call *Gastarbeiter* or "guest workers", officially instituted care not to offend another's sensibilities: all these things that should be taken for granted in any society that dares call itself civilised, surprised me in Canada because I had not encountered them elsewhere except by chance, in a certain individual, not as the accepted social code of an entire nation. When many years later my son attended high school in England, he was amazed at the prejudice that manifested itself daily through comments on race, religion, sexuality and class.

Novelty, opportunity, order, generosity define for me this vast country. But perhaps of all its aspects, it is the illusion of a democracy that attracts me most to Canada. I say an illusion because we believe in it but are not quite there yet, perhaps never will be. When our so-called

Liberal government pepper-sprays Canadian citizens to defend the interests of a foreign despot (as happened in Vancouver), or when it builds a wall around the ancient city of Quebec to protect a group of politicians from the anger of the people (as happened during an Economic Summit in the eighties), or when Canada Customs retains the right to ban books, telling us what we can and can't read (as happens from time to time), then the definition of democracy applied to Canada must be questioned.

And yet, and yet... In spite of such infirmities, nowhere else have I had the sense of truly being a citizen, of feeling truly at home. The Greeks believed that a citizen was he who could claim that his ancestors had shed their blood on the city's soil. Canada makes no such demands. It requires nothing but the contribution of one's own experience. Its virtue (or its magic) lies in that it both assimilates and hands back the dowry of its newcomers, so that they can both expend and preserve whatever it is they bring to this country. Perhaps this is possible only because Canada has chosen to keep a low political profile (reflected in the absence of Canadian news in the international press), a vision of cold open spaces (apparent in the publicities of Tourist Board), a modest and open identity (which excluded it from my earlier imagination), so that in some sense Canada illustrates the Second Law of Thermodynamics as applied to nationalities.

Why, in spite of living abroad, do I call Canada my home? After seemingly endless trials and adventures, Ulysses reaches Ithaka, the home he left so long ago that he barely remembers it. Is that old woman his wife? Is that young man his son? Is that toothless dog his dog? What proof does he have that this is not another of Circe's spells, the vision of

an imagination, a dream that no longer has the vagueness of a dream? How does he know that the place he now calls home is a place he has come back to? Can a traveller not come upon a foreign shore, to a city in which he has never set foot, and feel a pang of recognition, of acquaintance, suddenly able to guess what lies beyond that distant building and around that farthest corner? Can he not experience the joy of homecoming even if he is returning to a place in which he has never before set foot?

Now, when I think of *Heimat*, I think of Canada. Nowhere else have I been persuaded of sharing in the *res publica*, the "public thing" that has to do with customs and language and landscape, with assumptions and open questions and something like faith in the prevalance of our better qualities. Nowhere else have I wanted to pledge allegiance to a nation, to something beyond the individual, beyond a particular face or name. Nowhere else have I felt the need or the desire to claim myself part of a society whose brand-new Constitution still declares its belief in what (in another of my constant childhood books) Robert Louis Stevenson once called "an ultimate decency of things".

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