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Journey to Brighton Beach

SEVEN-FIFTY A.M. Two mothers pull, drag, and cajole their children to school. From my sixth-floor room in the Pan American Hotel I clearly see the tykes ambling along, clutching their mothers' hands. A Chinese man accompanies two older boys. All are heading southwest along 51st Avenue.

The post 9/11 skyline of Lower Manhattan rises in the distance. Without the twin towers, it looks like the Himalayas without Everest or the Alps without Mont Blanc. It makes me think of Ahmed.

Yellow and boxy school buses bounce along the street, in clusters, like frisky donkeys. A *Happy Dragon Childcare Center* bus the size of a large SUV offers plenty of room to its tiny passengers. An empty monster as large as a railcar rumbles towards the Queens Boulevard crossing, its huge metal body shaking, its engine roaring, its tailpipe emitting a cloud of black smoke. The brown face of its female driver looks out the window cool and nonchalant. She is wrapped in a sari and looks like a goddess riding a dragon.

8:10 a.m. 51st Avenue is deserted. New Yorkers have become a rule-following and rule-enforcing people. They elected Rudy, and Rudy delivered. It appears that school starts at 8:00, and that 8:00 means 8:00.

Apart from the gaping hole in the distant skyline, things look normal this weekday morning in Queens. The kids are in school at the appointed hour. Underpaid and overworked school staff try to teach them how to read and write and how to tolerate each other. Giant aircraft—about one every three minutes—slowly cruise past the window of my room on their majestic descent toward La Guardia Airport.

I jumped out of bed about an hour ago. Cheerful waiters bantering in a foreign tongue served up an excellent plate of bacon and eggs at the 24/7 diner a block away. The hotel's airport shuttles bobbed back and forth carrying tourists, men in suits, and women lugging lap-tops. The short walk to the news vendor led me past busy garages on Queens Boulevard. Was it Benjamin Franklin who said that if you hear a man hammering early in the morning you can safely lend him money? There are plenty of good credit risks at work in this busy neighbourhood. Life in New York, the wounded heart of the global village, has resumed.

But as I look out the window along the now empty 51st Avenue toward Manhattan looming in the distance, I keep seeing the face of Ahmed.

The alleys were narrow and crowded in the Arab quarter of the Old City core of Jerusalem. Shelves in small stalls bent under stacks of dresses and sweaters, hand-crafted pottery, transistor radios from the Far East. There were faded postcards, bright green vegetables, red and yellow piles of spices and grains, pyramids of oranges. Pastries oozed on metal trays, swimming on little puddles of thick brown syrup, and hats and caps hung from hooks waiting to protect the pale northern tourists from the relentless southern sun. An Israeli army patrol guarded the road with professional composure, neither threatening nor reassuring, fingers on the triggers of stubby little automatic guns.

Narrow stone steps led up to the historic Temple Mount, the place associated with Abraham, with Solomon's Temple, with Muhammad's ascent to heaven. I bought a ticket at a tiny wooden booth barely large enough to hold the slim woman giving me change, and stepped out into the open square on which rises the mosque, the Dome of the Rock. The huge building arched over the stony ledge said to be the place on which Isaac almost gave up the ghost.

The second I stepped on the open square, thin and swarthy men sprang into action. "Guide?"

With an impatient gesture I, having become a hardened tourist travelling the globe, shooed away the bearded faces, the blank eyes. It was getting late and there was just enough time for a quick glance at Abraham's rock. I had an itinerary. It did not include negotiating a guide's fee or answering the question "what country you from?"

A young Arab man followed me. His skinny body was encased in tight polyester pants with sharp creases and an old jacket that had seen better days, perhaps in Europe, before being recycled as a donation to less fortunate parts of the world. He shouted angrily.

“Why don’t you hire any of these men? They have hungry children!”

“Next time!” I shouted back, knowing there would not be a next time.

The angry young man followed a step or two behind me. In fluent English he explained that he wanted to go to America. He had applied for a visa. “I will never get one,” he said. “But all of us want to leave, all of us have to leave.”

My hand reached into a pocket to fish out a bill. But this man spoke English like a graduate of a school for rhetoricians. It would take more than a bribe to make him shut up. Something like a chance to have a life.

When the Dome closed half an hour later, I quickly retrieved my boots from a long line of battered shoes and sneakers at the entrance and returned to the crowded alleys of the Old City. The young man—in my mind he had become transformed from a nameless entity to Ahmed—was nowhere to be seen. Careful glances revealed no dark shadows of lean and angry figures, shiny steel blade in hand, who might be following the less than thoughtful tourist from the blessed West.

10:34 a.m. The MTA’s R train hurtles toward the East River and Manhattan. My goal is Brighton Beach. Major construction is blocking more direct routes from Central Avenue station near the Pan American Hotel.

A young woman sits across the aisle. The world does not seem to thrill her. She looks like she might not raise an eyebrow if Brad Pitt, smiling like the sun on a summer morning, sat down beside her. She absent-mindedly twirls a flip-flop at the end of a shapely foot. The fluffy collar of her white sweater caresses her neck and chin. Form-fitting blue denim pants complete her unobtrusive ensemble. On her back, squeezed against the seat, is a slim white bag containing a notebook or two. Her blonde hair is cut short, her pale skin shows only the faintest traces of summer days spent on a beach.

The young woman strikes me, in a strictly subjective and intuitive way, as northern European, as a fellow descendant of the ancestral clans who gestated, for a millennium or two, in the vast regions of Scandinavia before migrating south and into the history books. These ancestors, which we may or may not have in common, were hairy men and muscular women, at least according to the depictions of them cut into stone by Roman masons and sculptors. Towards the end of the second century BC, they pushed south in search of new land to conquer and settle. I can see their iron shields, spears, and swords flashing in the sunlight, and hear the thumps and squeaks of their ox-carts pulled on rugged paths through endless forests along rivers and across ranges of hills and mountains.

The *Cimbri* from the tip of Jutland were the first of these northern invaders to make it into the historical records. They wrecked towns and villages in the south and battled the Roman legions. They were followed by ever increasing numbers of Germanic clans, tribes, and entire peoples moving inexorably upstream along the Elbe and the Rhine into the heart of once Celtic Europe, then downstream along the Danube and the Rhone to threaten the Mediterranean basin.

Half a century after the *Cimbri's* first incursions, Julius Caesar watched the waves of newcomers with suspicion. It is because of the Romans that we call them *Germani*. Perhaps the name came from the Celtic tribes the intruders pushed around. It may mean "foreigners," "pests," or just plain "evildoers." It seems customary to refer to people other than those of one's own tribe in derogatory terms and to think of one's own people as the only tribe that matters and that is really human.

Like countless other groups—among them the Mongols, the Bantu, and the Lenapes who traded Manhattan to the Dutch—the *Germani* called themselves "the people," *teuta* in their language. A few sound shifts and two thousand years later, some of the *teuta* have become the modern Germans, *die Deutschen*.

The sound of metal crashing into metal rings in my ears and it is not because a Germanic spear struck a Roman shield buckle. The train's doors have shut once more. The yellow light of another subway station disappears behind us. The young woman, Ingrid I'll call her, still twirls her sandal.

Perhaps she is a Germanic person of the English variety, a descendant of men rowing sleek boats through the waves of the North Sea on their way from the shores of Germany and Denmark toward post-Roman England and its treasures, land, and women. Each man kept his sword, the *saxnoth*, within easy reach. They were the “comrades of the sword,” the Saxons. Names like Wessex, Sussex, and Essex remind us of them. They came with the Angles and the Jutes, and from the Angles we derived the words “English” and “England.” Ingrid could be the daughter these rough Saxons and Angles that rowed across the North Sea in the fourth and fifth centuries AD with greed and lust in their eyes.

I wonder: As she sits there, twirling, is she aware of her distant beginnings? Does she reach out to connect to her past, that context which makes many things meaningful? Does there burn within her a desire to know more about her origins, the sources of her being? Does she harbour a need to push forward tendrils, shoots, or roots to anchor herself in the maelstrom of globalization and post 9/11 *Angst* and oppression?

True, it's none of my business.

The R train screeches to a halt in 34th Street station. I tense to avoid sliding off the bench, the dark blue surface of which is hard and slippery like glass. The most demented vandal attacking it with an ice-pick would have a hard time scratching it. Ingrid effortlessly goes with the flow, a practised urbanite bending slightly forward to compensate for the momentum. The doors pop open. We are both on our feet. She disappears in the crowd.

A dense mass of people works its way through narrow passages. Rows of beefy police, a solid phalanx of portly midriffs, both male and female, obstruct some exits and channel the crowd toward others. Half of the MTA system is said to be under construction.

I am now in the centre of the city which symbolizes the new globalized and newly vulnerable world. Ground zero is close. It reminds me that life is a crapshoot, that humans propose while the fates, the furies, the *erynies*, the *moira* dispose.

The Q train to Brooklyn and Brighton Beach announces itself with a blast of air and rumbles into the station. This time I find myself across the aisle from what appears to be a mother and her three young sons from a distant part of the world.

Distant?

Try “another planet.”

The woman sits on the hard bench, erect and graceful at the same time. In her red jacket and matching skirt, she is a picture of tailor-made elegance. Like Ingrid, she is not rattled by the powerful forces of our accelerating and decelerating steel box of a universe. When she turns sideways toward her charges, her mouth looks like a rose in bloom and her lips seem on the verge of quivering in anticipation of possibly interesting surprises. She watches her boys unobtrusively, but constantly, like a hen keeping an eye on her chicks.

The four faces are dark brown, the bodies short and gracile, the heads round and crowned by black mops of hair cut short. Not a blemish. Not a jagged edge, not a protruding nose, not a jutting jaw, just four harmonious faces looking at the urban world around them with eyes wide open, as if observing it from behind some dense forest canopy. They could be the faces in photographs I have seen posted on the internet, depicting indigenous people of the upper Orinoco River on the fringes of the Amazon basin, the people referred to as the Yanomami, at home in the watery world of tropical rivers and rain forests, bearers of strange names like Nakahedami, Huuhuumi, Sinabimi.

Two worlds are meeting across this aisle, thrown together by the blender called “globalization.” Theirs is the world of hunters and gatherers in tropical forests. Mine is that of farmers eking out an existence on the postglacial European loess lands. Our worlds collided when Columbus reached the Americas. And now we share this niche of the one globalized world, this New York MTA subway car, this rumbling box on clattering wheels hurtling through the ground like a crazed mole.

Judging strictly from appearances, and quite possibly too hastily and erroneously, the streams of genes that mixed and joined to form the plan and the construction machinery of the physical selves of my four fellow MTA passengers at best included tiny Spanish, Portuguese, or other European tributaries. Whatever their people or tribe or clan, they seem to be members of a small population which managed to evolve in a distinctive niche in the course of thousands of years. In the basins of the Amazon and the Orinoco River, there was sun, there was water, there were vast and dense forests. Maybe this environment selected genes coding for melanin and for the vast complexes of proteins building, constituting, and

maintaining short and lithe bodies blending into, and able to move easily through, dense undergrowth. Nakahedami—for this is what I'll call the lady in red—and her boys could be products shaped in the course of millennia in tropical jungles.

Suddenly the four faces across from me exchange looks. Subdued bursts of sound follow. The sounds are unfamiliar, perhaps those of one of the thousands of Amerindian languages still in use, though on the verge of extinction. That would make these fellow passengers not only genetically but also linguistically different from Ingrid and myself. It would confirm that we are the latest shoots on the tips of branches that separated long ago.

Nakahedami and the boys conjure up more images of ancient people pushing into rugged new terrain and paddling boats along ocean shores and across straits. These were probably less hairy, shorter, and stockier than Ingrid's putative Germanic forebears, and they were, we are told, part of the ancestral human populations of East Asia that gave rise not only to many, perhaps all, of the early Americans, but also to the large modern populations of China, Korea, and Japan.

Perhaps these North East Asians trekked across the Bering Strait landbridge that connected Asia and Alaska during the last ice age (that period the geologists call the most recent stadial of the most recent glacial stage of our present Cenozoic Ice Age). That was a time when sea levels had dropped once again because the cold weather locked sea water into vast glaciers and ice-fields around the poles. It seems increasingly likely that people from Siberia also paddled along the shores of the Aleutian Islands, of Alaska, and of British Columbia. Either way, they first came some 12,000 years ago, and perhaps much earlier.

I offer a cautious smile to my four distant relatives and fellow citizens of the global megalopolis. The youngest boy stops in mid-motion. His eyes are large and dark. They, it seems to me, cautiously and noncommittally acknowledge the stranger. It is as if embedded in the noise of everyday interactions two signals have managed to reach across a great divide. It is a divide of some 35,000 years if you believe the experts' estimates based on how different we are genetically and linguistically and on the pace with which such differences are thought to develop and accumulate.

Another jolting stop. Another station. We have reached Canal Street. Three men and a woman march into the car in close

formation and with purposeful strides. The leader is a tall and fit man in a white shirt adorned by a dark tie; he assesses the configuration of empty and occupied seats and signals with a quick nod. The four arrange themselves in pairs, sitting down to face each other across the aisle. The tall man is all business, setting goals and defining assignments: "This is the objective" "Chuck's job is to get them on board" "Don't open the folder when talking to them"

True, skin colour and facial features are a most flimsy indication of a person's genome. Of course, only a small number of genes, out of a full human complement of some 30,000 to 35,000, appear to determine these characteristics, whose great significance in human societies is based solely on the fact that they are immediately visible. Granted, the black-skinned man leading this little group on the frontline of business may carry more genes passed down from prehistoric Germanic tribes milling about in Scandinavia than Ingrid or I. His name may even be Francis or Darryl.

Call me a racist, if you must. But in my world the tall and authoritative man has become Kofi the African, and joined Ingrid and Nakahedami as an exemplar of one of the different human populations of prehistoric and historic times which the maelstrom of globalization is now blending into the world population of the future.

Kofi is a bear: big yet agile. His voice cuts through the din of the train. It is reassuring and confidence-inducing, like that of a pilot announcing "a bit of turbulence." This is a man at ease in his "position of leadership," who imparts his instructions with an encouraging smile and a hint of jocularly. In earlier times he might have been called "king." Now they probably call him "coach."

Kofi and his team are embedded in the global megalopolis, the living, breathing, heaving membrane of six billion people constituting twenty-first-century humanity. In their hands and dangling from their belts and in their briefcases are the technological extensions of their nervous systems which connect them in multiple ways with everyone else in the global village. They carry blue briefing books, presumably containing marching orders, targets to be attained, and rules of engagement. Some campaign, intervention, or attack is about to be unleashed. They may be selling shirts stitched together in Guangdong sweatshops, plastic kitchenware moulded in roadside shops in Indonesia, cacao beans reaped on

the slopes of the Andes. They may be installing software to build the next generation of all-inclusive data bases. Maybe they run human relations workshops to prevent workers from “going postal.”

A sudden surge of electrical power has propelled the train out of the black tunnel into an explosion of bright sunlight. Where the R train had thundered from Queens into Manhattan deep under the East River, the Q train now carries us across it to Brooklyn on a lofty span of metal as if we were in an amusement park riding a flying incarnation of the ancient carts that once lurched across bumpy pathways carrying the chattel, the infants, perhaps a grandmother or two of Ingrid’s putative ancestors. Behind us is the wound left by the deed perpetrated by Ahmed’s brothers that so opened the twenty-first century with a bang.

They served notice, those peculiar brothers: notice that the overcrowded world is full of people who have been abused, who bear grudges, who are tinder boxes with lit fuses. They served notice that the intricate network of information channels and transportation links constituting the new global civilization is vulnerable to blows applied to crucial and exposed nodes; notice that no one is safe from flying superbombs, from deadly spores, bacteria, viruses, or molecules.

But for the moment life has resumed in the office, apartment, condo, and coop blocks and towers reaching into the sky behind us. These warrens of corridors, utility shafts, suites, rooms, and cubicles—one piled on top of the other—are the current end-station of the 100,000 year human journey that began in caves and rock shelters in southern parts of the world, the journey that brought Ingrid, Nakahedami, Kofi, and me to New York.

That mother of all journeys began in places like Border Cave and Klasies River Mouth in South Africa, Skhul and Qafzeh in the Middle East, Mungo Lake in Australia. That is where the Eves and Adams from whom we have all descended and whose DNA we carry in each of the estimated sixty trillion cells constituting our bodies emerged as anatomically modern humans, as what most people have in mind when they say “*homo sapiens*.” In those old caves, they grunted, shouted, cried, yelled, and giggled as they listened to a bragging hunter claiming a narrow escape from a hungry leopard. That is where they sorted fibres, kernels, berries; where fat sizzled and dripped from a leg of antelope or from the carcass of a rodent on spears above the flames.

We have had our moment in the sun and are about to descend back underground on our journey to Brighton Beach and the stretch of boardwalk that connects it with Coney Island and its arcades and greasy stalls purveying frankfurters and hamburgers, ketchup and the fries once known as "French fries." We are leaving one place rich in history and reaching another. Behind us is *Manna-hata*, the island of the Lenapes. Ahead is *Breukelen*, once a tiny village of Dutch pioneers.

When Henry Hudson sailed up the river that now bears his name in 1609, he found a rugged shoreline harbouring people who were not friendly. He reported that "savages" fired arrows at his ship. It was apparently his local sources who called the place something like *Manna-hata*, a name now thought by most to mean "hilly island" in the Lenapes' Algonquian language which the linguists call "Munsee." It is a slab of granite lying between two rivers and scraped smooth by the rock and gravel pushed forward by the most recent advance of the ice during the last ice age some 20,000 to 12,000 years ago. Little did Hudson know that Manna-hata would become the most famous place on the globe. In his day the region inspired European pioneers to send excited reports back home of fresh air, clean waters, huge fish and lobsters, profuse and vigorous vegetation. It appears, though there is no bill of sale, that the Dutchman Peter Minuit bought the island from local chiefs in 1626 on behalf of the Dutch West India Company for sixty guilders worth of European manufactured goods, including cloth, axes, hoes, and kettles.

Below us is the ferry landing. Fulton Street leads up the hill, an old roadway perhaps used by the Lenapes, site of the place the Dutch called Breukelen when they founded it in 1646. In 1660 its inhabitants numbered 134. Its preacher, it appears, described it as "an ugly little village with the church in the middle of the road." Today Breukelen is Brooklyn, and it has many churches and many roads.

The train has practically leapt back into its tunnel and come to a stop at a deserted platform in DeKalb Avenue station. The PA system erupts with a torrent of scratchy noise. We wait. The Amerindian boys fidget. Their mother counsels patience.

Our train is about to propel itself through the arc of moraines extending from Jamaica Hills in Queens to Todt Hill on Staten Island. These mounds are the debris which the glaciers of the last

ice age pushed across the bedrock and left behind when the weather turned warmer and the ice began to melt and to retreat back up the Hudson Valley. Ten thousand years of erosion—caused by rain and the run-off from the melting ice to the north—reduced the moraines to gentle swellings. Much of what was left of them was then flattened by the city's planners, engineers, and developers.

The train is moving again. It picks up speed suddenly and bolts out of the station like a smacked pony. The surge of energy wanes as fast as it built up. We coast. Kofi and his crew look alert. Their muscles tense in anticipation. They grasp their blue folders firmly. They cast glances at the scratched windows to catch the first signs of light and of Atlantic Avenue station. The train stops and Kofi briskly steps out on the platform. His entourage is right behind him.

At Prospect Street station, having traversed the moraine belt, we leave the tunnels for good and begin to rumble across the flatlands, crossing streets and modest avenues, past old mansions, row houses, grey concrete garages and work shops, brown brick apartment blocks.

A tall tree signals the outskirts of the urban agglomeration. The end of the journey to Brighton Beach is near. I have travelled with Kofi, the presumed Southerner of African descent. I have—entirely within the bounds of appropriateness—admired Nakahedami, the Easterner whose origins most likely lie back in Alaska, Beringia and North East Asia. I have felt some kind of kinship with Ingrid, the Westerner presumably linked to the shores of the North Sea, to Scandinavia and northern Germany. We all have been part of the long journey from the caves of southern Africa and Asia to the global megalopolis of restless humanity now enveloping the globe.

Life in Lower Manhattan has resumed. Men in suits rush to restaurants and take-out counters and are served by quick Hispanic men and women. Time is money again. Cars inch along the streets. The stores are crowded. Students lounge about in front of Pace University. Visitors gaze at exhibits in St. Paul's Chapel and marvel that it was not crushed underneath the towers in whose shadow it stood.

The train has slowly turned west, steel wheels squealing, on the last leg of its journey. A sliver of ocean appears between apart-

ment blocks. We stop high on the elevated track. The platform is so narrow it must worry the MTA's legal department.

Two boys gallop past like young stallions, pant crotches practically sweeping the ground. Nakahedami gently pushes her brood toward the cast iron stairs leading down to the street level. I find my way between ancient, low-rise, brown-brick apartment buildings to a restaurant on the wooden boardwalk lining the ocean. A beautiful Russian girl brings a menu. She does so languidly, sullenly, exuding disdain. Whatever the promises made to bring her to America, they clearly remain to be fulfilled. Her objectifying gaze turns me, for a moment, into a male unworthy of her luminous presence, let alone of her menial food-bringing ministrations. She does not seem to be in the mood to listen to an explanation of why we are really not strangers and why she should be in awe of the human journey from cave to Manhattan towers and of the essential sameness of the fried chicken leg she has reluctantly plunked in front of me and the meat sizzling in the flames of ancient southern hearths a hundred millennia ago.