

Nothing Could Be Finer...

In 1982, heather covered moorlands and the view of Highcliff Nab from my bedroom window were exchanged for loblolly pines and kudzu vines in Carolina.

But before leaving I went to the Guisborough library and found the one book in the collection on South Carolina. It was published in the 1950s. Inside its pages, I recall finding a black and white photograph of Fort Moultrie with cannons squarely aimed at the enemy. From this site on June 28, 1776 the Colonists sent the British Commodore and his dashing Red Coats packing.

Fast forward 206 years, coincidentally on another nice day in June, this time the 22nd, and after things had calmed down a bit, the Brits tried again. This time it was me. I arrived, traipsing down the jetway with my chihuahua, Lucy.

Red not being my color, I opted for a primrose yellow shirt from British Home Stores, green trousers and white shoes. Yes, I remember some very specific details. I was singing to myself, "Ooh, I've been to Georgia and California" from the song "I've Never Been to Me" by Charlene, which was inexplicably number one on the UK chart at the time, after failing to even dent it when first released in 1977.

I remember the airport address system paging passengers *Bumgardner* and *Christmas*, because I love a funny name. And a baggage handler asked if my chihuahua was a mongoose.

I remember the long flight took us across the southern tip of Greenland, the edge of Canada and down the east coast of the US, where we descended through towering cumulonimbus clouds, an afternoon storm brewing, at the Atlanta airport.

We had a connecting flight to Charlotte, NC, from where my dad drove us to our new home in Florence just as the sun was setting. It was the first time I saw fireflies.

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Just a few months earlier, a job offer in hand, Dad pitched his idea of emigrating with a slideshow. Sitting on the sofa, I watched as the carousel clicked and rotated, projecting pictures on the living room wall – the Catholic Church, the High School, the Shopping Mall. Dad pointed out how opportunities abound in America. I think that's why he thought we should go there. Either that, or he just wanted to move to a

place with lots of really nice golf courses, as the bias in his slide selection quickly began to suggest.

Now here I was, sitting on the very same sofa, on my first full day in America. The images once projected on the wall, were now the reality outside the living room window.

The fact that we shipped all our furniture and everything we owned, down to the address book in the sideboard drawer, 4000 miles to be with, us said something about our approach to emigrating. It suggested we weren't really prepared to leave *anything* about our old lives behind. Although that stinging in the eyes felt during tearful goodbyes to grandparents should have given us an inkling that this would not be possible.

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With the threat of high school or college brushed aside until the end of August, it was time for the summer holidays to begin.

I borrowed a bike from our neighbor Krispie. She suited her name, with her face deeply wrinkled from sixty years of sun exposure and her frazzle-haired pixie cut. Impatient, bossy, and lively, she was "snap crackle and pop" in a tennis skirt and sneakers.

She called me Sam, never Simon. Perhaps it wasn't worth her time to learn my name. After all, I was clearly no match for Henrik, her Danish exchange student, who at 16, the same age as me, could already pilot an airplane. All I'd ever be, was just a passenger on one.

I peddled down her driveway, trying not to wobble. I was off to explore the Pee Dee, as the region is known, named after its former Native American Tribe. Biking along side the tobacco fields, I learned the language of my new landscape with field guides from the library. I stopped to marvel at the intricate layers on a passionflower and scarlet tanagers perched on cornstalks. I circled back past Oakdale swamp, where I carried an ungrateful snapping turtle safely across the busy road. Then I raced home to beat the epic thunderstorm rolling in from Timmons ville, excited to find a black king snake waiting for me on the doorstep. My heart was full.

On the weekends, when not trying out a new golf course, Dad would take us for picnics on the coast. Here I felt the tug of the Atlantic on my swimming trunks as the ocean pulled back. And here, I stared, entranced at the sight of bottlenose dolphins

arching through the waves at Hunting Island while brown pelicans flew overhead in formation. This was definitely what I would call my honeymoon period with Carolina.

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The honeymoon was over. Yes, I know it was short. I quickly learned there was another, less appealing, side to my new love – reality! And that’s clearly something I’m divorced from.

Francis Marion College was named for a Brigadier General in the Revolutionary War. A crafty militia leader, he was known for his guerrilla tactics in outsmarting the Brits. Fortunately, I outsmarted *him* with an SAT score just high enough to gain entrance to his namesake, so no high school for me.

Dad dropped me off in front of some very imposing columns and told me to “go in there and register for classes.” I did, but then the only way out was past a lady at a cash register. What, you have to pay? A few days later, after word got around, I found myself summoned to the Dean’s office for some kind of orientation or was it an intervention?

Shortly after that I was assigned to the Colonel who worked in the Development Office. His mission was to drive me to and from college, since I didn’t have a driver’s license. The first thing I learned at college was Americans are, by nature, super helpful.

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The Colonel, was something of a war hero. Which war you ask? How about all of them! He fought in World War II, the Korean Conflict, the Vietnam War and the Cold War. He parachuted from helicopters with the Green Berets into enemy combat zones. He lived around the corner from us, in a house, no surprise, hidden by its camouflage paint scheme – inside, the American eagle featured heavily in the home decor.

Like bootcamp, except with intense awkward and uncomfortable social interaction, the ride to college was the toughest thirty minutes of my life, twice a day, five times a week for three semesters. But it didn’t *break* me. *Awkward and uncomfortable* is my superpower.

The Colonel would never make a real man of me. I'd failed my driving test twice and was close to doing so a third time. And I hadn't done anything brave recently, unless you count bathing an angry chihuahua in the kitchen sink.

I tried to make myself invisible for the ride. Shrinking in the passenger seat, I retreated to the little bunker in my head, and harmonized paint colors, prepping for my painting 101 class.

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About that driving test, after I "landed" a perfect 3-point turn with Olympic precision, and completed a flawless parallel parking "routine," I didn't expect shouts of "bravissimo," from the line at the DMV, but I did expect to pass.

The officer told me to come back when I'd had more practice. He would not, and could not, pinpoint any actual mistakes because there weren't any.

He just didn't like the way I walked, and he didn't like the way I talked. I know that because I honed those skills of perception in the schoolyard. He was the bully all grown up. He failed me just because he could, and he did so, not just once, but twice.

After the second fail, I raged inside, "You dumbass piece of shit in your stupid Deputy Dawg hat."

On the outside I politely said, "Yes sir." And I didn't go back to the DMV until I was 24!

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The British Club was where expat wives could lean on each other for support, while holding a glass of sherry in one hand and a flaky-pastry sausage roll in the other. These exclusive meetings were held monthly, behind the faux-wood paneled walls of a member's den.

It was a couple of hours of sisterhood where I'm sure Mum shared how, as new immigrants, we'd been prodded and poked for a required physical at a clinic in Columbia; fingerprinted at the Florence County jail, with inmates in holding cells in full view; and interrogated by immigration officers in Charlotte, where, "My Simon was asked if he'd ever been a member of the Communist Party." The answer was no. (But I am a Blue Peter competition winner, which is far more subversive, trust me. And I have a badge to prove it.)

Someone would have consoled Mum with, "Aw, don't worry luv, *they* did that to all of us. Winnie needs another sherry over here!"

And if that didn't help, then it was nothing a good old fashioned sugar high couldn't fix. Someone would surreptitiously pass around the stash of Licorice Allsorts, or other contraband candy, smuggled in from a recent trip to the homeland. Those were the days before the imports aisle at Piggly Wiggly.

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One day, during my ongoing struggle (or was it resistance) to assimilate I was sitting in a geography class when the professor asked at what degree of latitude Florence SC was located? One eager student's guess placed us somewhere in the polar ice cap.

Unfortunately, I just couldn't help myself. I raised my hand and said, "34.1954 degrees north of the equator." To gasps of amazement, I was correct. I didn't win any fans. It just confirmed I was weird. Soaring to the top of the class was no way to fit in.

Sadly, even if I knew where I was to the "nth" degree on planet earth, inside I was totally lost.

I'm not sure how the plan evolved, and I use the word *plan* loosely, but I soon found myself with airplane ticket and portfolio in hand, heading back to England, and the prime meridian, at least for the school year.

It was a case of *do something, do anything*, before "feeling lost" becomes "irreparably lost".

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"Nothing could be finer than to be in Carolina in the morning..." unless it's the morning you have to say goodbye to your mum. It was February, the last of the camellias shedding their petals by the screened porch door – their bittersweet poetry reminding us "To everything there is a season." Was I really leaving?

And so began what was to become a lifelong push and pull, between "here" and "there". The privilege to live in another country, with the opportunities and choices it afforded, had come with a price.

A *hello* on one side of the Atlantic means a *goodbye* on the other. Not being fully present *here* and not being fully present *there* means not being fully present anywhere. Home will have to be a state of mind.

Dad drove me to the airport. I began to envy those that get to be born, grow up, and die all in the same place and get to share their milestones with family fixed in place around them. They must feel grounded. Not me. In a couple of hours I would be at a cruising altitude of 34,000 feet.

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As I speed into the star lit wonder of the deep blue yonder, it is confirmed; I will never be the pilot of my life – just a passenger in it.

Turbulence expected, the Captain put the “fasten seat belt” sign on. Sarcasm tickled me with the notion... it was probably Henrik in the cockpit!