

# Two Hundred and Sixty

January 2024

With two point six weeks left to my life in the US, the thought occurs to me that I have already lived two hundred and sixty of them. As with so much else in life however, it's that final one percent that's proving so troublesome.

I am, I think, having trouble letting go. There is nothing like three months of being homeless to make you yearn for home.

And we're leaving it. Saying one long, painfully extruded goodbye. Whenever the time comes to grapple with whatever fatal degeneration will end me, I will at least have had practice. There are a thousand things I want to say, and feel monstrously constrained insofar as I can only release my thoughts one word at a time. This may be one of those cases where it can't be shown, only be told. So let me tell you about how I've spent the most recent 0.39 percent of this great American adventure.

On Christmas Eve we came in from Springville Alabama - a really unimprovably common name for an unimprovably common place - crossing the state border into some inevitably foul weather. We were beginning to worry that flooding might stop us making it the final half mile of eight thousand. Unfortunately for our friends, it didn't. Thanks to the ever-capricious nature of government livestock policy, today doesn't mark the start of the intended three day in-and-out, but instead sets the light on a fuse of pet-related purgatorial uncertainty. Nevertheless, it is good to see friends. It is good to not be homeless for a night. Plus I got to see how utterly degenerate the American Catholic version of midnight (well six) mass is. I tell you what, all priests seem to be labouring under this delusion that what the congregation is begging for is the pastor's thoughts on their favourite television show. Give the people what they want, that's what I say padre! The most alarming discovery was that the order of service had a full two pages of advertisements between the carols. At least now I know that New Orleans is home to a plumber by the name of Al Bourgeois, and that man is *Catholic*.

On Christmas day I bonded with our host's fighter pilot father over our shared experience wasting the military's money. Then I ruined it all by telling him I was practically a communist in all the ways that matter. We dressed the dogs as gas station mascots and had a good time, as we usually do with our friends. It was only slightly ruined by my mother's insistence over the phone that after my grandfather quit smoking there wasn't a day of his life touched by true pleasure again. I am two months into my own post-nicotine era thanks

for asking, and I hate it. I'm going to say nice things about all of you in a bit and I want you to know that I would not only take it all back but I would see each and every one of you dead for a single cigarette.

On boxing day I performed the clichè of breaking into the office on drugs in order to criticise my replacement's work product. I get the always-exciting experience of being on a bus the wrong side of Leonidas as it hits me how much more LSD I've taken than I needed to. Well, *needed* is too strong a word, but you know what I mean. Ultimately though the worst thing that happens to me is that I no joke slightly shit myself walking back from lunch. I suspect Christmas greed has more to do with that one than the drugs though. Still, I discovered some fun songs in fun ways. I have a vivid memory of slightly-staggering along the Audubon park circuit when some good old boy driving the park rubbish truck pulls up alongside me. He delivers a wink at the instant - the *instant* - I hear ramblin' man for the first time.

The night after we go out and have a great meal. This turns out to be in the same spot as the bar that 'poisoned' my mother with gin at the end of our first year in the city. We also had the displeasure in getting to know two of the coked out lunatics which these streets seem to just crawl with. It is dark, and a large south American is screaming 'help me' at the top of his lungs. He is simultaneously making pelvic thrusts of the most erotic kind. It was a fishing story. And not one day hence we got to celebrate two people who make me very happy getting married. I presume this was done purely for my benefit, but I suppose as a side effect it put a smile on their faces too. I got pretty shit faced and sang Rhinestone cowboy in a bar at two am. Unbelievably, that wasn't even what got us wedding leftovers kicked out of Cajun's. I sleep in after that. We do however join the recovery party just in time for the groom's father to push a couple of joints into my hand. Great guy, I learned a lot about steel mills from him.

Saturday is drugs day. Well, harder drugs day. I get to take one final amble through Audubon while high as a kite, and got to enjoy a friend finally, *finally* clawing that bit of respect he deserves from me, with a pretty excellent sermon on the banks of the Mississippi. Then I ruined it by taking us all down the levy path that has a freight rail on one side and a military installation on the other. Doing that one in the dark isn't high on my repeat list, and having a firework go off not twenty feet from my face is another. Fortunately, we had our more responsible friends to save us from ourselves once darkness fell.

There was a new year I am frankly too tired to remember, followed by an evening camping out by the lake. This morning I got to experience the baffling structural engineering of the Pontchartrain causeway once more. In their infinite wisdom its designer chose to have it assembled in pieces of a size that conspire with the speed limit to resonate with the shock absorbers of your vehicle. As alarming as it is to feel, it looks worse for the semi-articulated lorry doing ninety past your ear.

And to round it all off, tonight we get to go to my very favourite bar full of some of my very favourite people, and do one of my very, *very* favourite things: Show off.

When I first came to the US it was 2018 and winter in New Jersey. After three months I swore I would never willingly return to the awful cultural vacuum across the Atlantic. More proof - as if it was needed - that I really am a fool who doesn't know what's best for me. So God help me, I hate that you've all done it, but done it you have. You've really almost convinced me it really might be the greatest country on earth, even if you do have to live in perpetual fear of being shot. Really! What a crazy thing to say about a country that's *really* starting to struggle with its fascism problem!

So yes, I could write a book about what's happened to me in the past two hundred and sixty weeks - and watch out, it's coming - but I didn't want to wait to tell you all this bit before I left. Namely that I've had a blast this week, and the two hundred and fifty nine before it. If you're reading this, I hold you partially to blame.

I consider myself lucky. Lucky in life, in wife, and most importantly friends! Family could always be more cognisant of how special I am, but three out of four ain't bad. So with all that said, I only need one more thing to make my life perfect. I need to be lucky *tonight*.

I will see you at the bar.