

## "My Facebook Problem"

I

Semipalatinsk

The other day I happened to be looking at a map of Siberia, where my fiancée and I are hoping to visit an old friend of mine. Sarah has been living in Novosibirsk for 25 years, teaching Cold War American culture at the university there, and working for (and starting) NGOs. She moved to Siberia in 1992, after the fall of the Soviet Union, and although she had only a BA from Columbia (in history, with a concentration in Soviet Studies), she was able to get a teaching job in Akademgorodok, Novosibirsk's university center. She also did consulting work for startup NGOs, and later founded one of her own. She met and married Ivan, a native of Novosibirsk, and they adopted a daughter, Carolina (named after Sarah's father). From my perspective, they lead an exotic and adventurous life in Siberia, with an apartment in the city, and a dacha they built by a river in the Altai Republic, near the Mongolian border. In the spring of 2014 the river flooded and carried away much of the house, but they rebuilt. On Facebook there are pictures of Sarah in high boots, standing amid the rubble. She is smiling - and I have no

trouble understanding why. Yet another adventure in Siberia! More obstacles to overcome! Life is good! I know I could never do what Sarah has done, but it cheers me to know that she is there and doing it. I've now had several dreams about her in Siberia, and am eager to visit the scenes of her adventures. But until Julie and I can manage this (she is her mother's principal caregiver, and can't leave town for more than a few days), I'm content to make do with the map, and picturing another life in those strange, faraway places.

I have always loved to let my eyes and mind drift over the tantalizing details of maps, dreaming and "contemplating about" places I've never been to - the remoter the better. I like to imagine the possibilities of being - and Being - in these places. What would it be like to live in Novosibirsk, as Sarah does -- to be engaged in good work there, or merely to be dreaming, gazing out the window, watching the snowflakes fall on a Wednesday winter afternoon? To be totally locked into the "sphere of immanence" at such a specific time and place? What would be the particulars of the weather and landscape there? Would there be distant vistas available to the contemplator? Surely there would be, there on the steppes of Central Asia. (That's also the name of a beautiful,

evocative piece of music by Borodin, "On the Steppes of Central Asia".) Would it be possible, I wonder, simultaneously to be fully in such a place, and yet not? And what does that even mean? It might mean, I think, while being fully there (or almost fully there -- for the contemplator, by virtue of his contemplations, can never be fully anywhere; to contemplate is always to be partly elsewhere), to also have a kind of "contemplational" purchase-point upon the place, and one's presence in it, the better from which to regard and appreciate its significance in the larger scheme of things. For example, what would it be like, while contemplating, on the spot, about the Being of Siberia -- and about one's own being there -- to also, at the same time, be incongruously remembering the feel of the banal streets of suburban Los Angeles, where I grew up, and which I dislike almost as much as I am inalienably attached to it? What would such a "dual contemplationalization" be like? (In fact, I had precisely such a dual contemplationalization on some rocks above the sea in Corsica in the summer of 1975, when my mother's girlhood in Scranton, PA, suddenly - and for no apparent reason - reared up and became almost palpably present to me. I later wrote a poem about the experience.)

(Please excuse my faux-Heideggerian neologisms. I am now trying, for the umpteenth time, to read him again, or at least to prepare to read him, which I have never quite been able to do. Yet I remain attracted to the idea of Heidegger - not to the man, who was a fucking Nazi, but to his "thought-world", which has always intrigued me; and these neologisms seem necessary in order to explore my own thought-world. I could be wrong, though - they could be not necessary at all; and in any case, I'm sorry if they're annoying.)

Or is all of this merely the rankest mystification - the obscure ramblings of a mystico-philosophical dilettante? That may be; yet such was always, and still is, the manner of my encounters with maps - not so much for the information contained in them (though that is welcome), but rather for their power of "dreamery" - the abstracted, contemplational state they evoke in the "dreamerer" (the person engaged in dreamery). And such was the case in my recent encounter with the Soviet-era map of Siberia in Julie's atlas.

And yet not; also quite not. For my pondering of the city of Semipalatinsk, not all that far from Novosibirsk - the former located, according to that old atlas, in Siberia, but now actually in Kazakhstan - ended not in the

usual ontological contemplationalizations, but rather in the making of a joke. A bad joke, as it turned out. Very bad. I remarked to Julie that I wondered what had happened to "Palatinsk" - the "whole Palatinsk" - such that they had had to create a place called "Semi-Palatinsk". She smiled at the joke, and that was that. (Or so I thought.) I then went out for a short walk, and during that walk I became enamored of my little joke -- so enamored that when I came back, I posted it on Facebook. This is what I wrote:

I have a question for my friends who are living or have lived in Russia. It's about the Siberian city of Semipalatinsk. I mean, Really? So what happened to Palatinsk? Was it destroyed during the War, and they only rebuilt half of it? What's up with that?

And soon enough, there were replies:

Strange sense of humor.

Josh - Semipalatinsk is at the center of the old Soviet nuclear infrastructure -- horrific birth defects and other diseases related to radiation contamination - part of the big nuclear hangover that hasn't been fully registered yet...

It is actually in Kazakhstan and yes, the site of nuclear testing with tragic results. [This was from Sarah, whom I'd tagged.]

It means, I think, Seven Tents...  
Whatever it means, bad things happened

to the citizens there. What made you ask about that?

No more atlas for you.

With a blush of shame I recognized that I'd brought about a "Whoops Situation" -- at the very least, it was a "Whoops Situation". "Whoops" is what I say, out loud, when I have embarrassed myself, or when someone else has done or said something that embarrasses me for them. My son Zack also calls this a "Never Talk Again Situation", referring to a classmate he knew in high school who, when someone said something stupid, clueless, or otherwise embarrassing, would point to them and say, deadpan, "Never talk again." My Facebook posting was probably more of a Never Talk Again Situation than a Whoops Situation; but it was also sort of both - and really neither. It was worse. It was actually more of a "You Are an Unfunny, Ignorant Asshole Situation". For was it not possible that I had heard or read about Semipalatinsk before? That the name of the place had somehow gotten lodged, unbeknownst to me, in that sometimes dim brain of mine, because of the heinous actions that had been perpetrated in the region? From 1949 to 1989, as I now read on Wikipedia, the Soviet military conducted 456 atomic and thermonuclear bomb tests, below and above ground, over an area the size of New Jersey. As a result,

about 200,000 people ended up with cancer, birth defects, and other grave medical problems.

And my contribution was to make a joke about it.

To complicate matters, I had made this joke in a voice not my own. It was the flip, jejune voice of an obnoxious contemporary American teenager or 20-something. A smartass of the sort I had always hated: knowing, smug, self-assured. Detestable. Not me, not my own voice, and yet... Tat tvam asi, the ancient Hindu scriptures tell us. That thou art. "That" being, in the scriptures, the greater universal soul. Except the "that" that I was part of, in this case, was not the universal soul, but just an asshole. And that asshole was part of me, too. In a sense, it was me. Furthermore, I had chosen to sound like that. I had deliberately and carefully - over the course of my short walk -- crafted those stupid sentences, that unfeeling, thoroughly objectionable tone. What was I thinking? I guess I was thinking I was being funny. In a voice not my own, fundamentally not me, yet undeniably of my making, I was aping the tone and diction of a callow, shallow twit. And not for the purpose of making fun of such a person, or adopting an ironic persona - no irony here, m'lady; no cleverness at all - but just the more emphatically to deliver the message, which was my paltry joke.

That thou art. I was "that guy". I had that dumb, asshole sophomoric inside of me. My father used to like to quote the remark of some 18<sup>th</sup>-century wag - I can't remember who; not Dr. Johnson, but some lesser contemporary, probably (actually, it might have been Dr. Johnson, speaking of someone else) - who, "for a goat's worth of wit, purchased a lifetime of repentance." That was putting it perhaps a little more dramatically and sweepingly than the situation merited; nevertheless, it expressed well enough the kind of tradeoff I had made.

On the other hand, no one had gotten hurt - except maybe me, who now looked like an idiot. But that was my own fault. I hadn't brought pain to another person (except the vicarious pain you feel when someone else makes a fool of themselves). It was far from being, say, another Luca Debacle.

## II

### The Luca Debacle

In the summer of 2009 Zack and I travelled to the south of Italy - near the town of Lecce, in the heel of the boot - to visit my friend Antonio, whom I hadn't seen in 34 years. In college I'd done a Junior Year Abroad in Padua, where I met Antonio, who was studying medicine at the university.



We became friends. Antonio, my roommate Larry and I all hung out together through the fall, winter and spring of '74-'75. When my parents came over to visit for Christmas we drove the length of Italy from Padua to Lecce, where Antonio had arranged for us to stay at a small local hotel (which was actually closed for the winter - but Antonio persuaded them to open up just for us.) He showed us around the area, and we met his parents and sister, and had a country banquet at their home. It was a memorable evening.

After I got back to the States for my senior year of college, Antonio and I exchanged a couple of letters, but then fell out of touch for many years, until 2009, when his daughter Elena found me on Facebook. (Her father, she said, wasn't on Facebook; apparently, he didn't even own a computer. Which was odd, since - as I later learned -- he'd been a doctor - an oncologist - before taking early retirement.) I gave her my phone number, and the next day Antonio called. We had a warm reunion over the phone, and spoke several times after that. He invited me to come visit that summer. I talked it over with Zack, who at the time was studying Italian in college, and didn't need much persuading to make the trip with me.

Before we left, I called Larry, whom I'd been in touch with now and then over the years, to tell him I'd spoken with Antonio. Larry (who was on Facebook) also posted a message on my Wall (it was called the Wall back then), saying how eager he was to hear all about the trip as soon as I got back. At that time I also got a Facebook friend request from someone named Luca, who identified himself as a cousin of Antonio. I accepted Luca's request, and we exchanged a few pleasantries on Messenger. (Or was it on my Wall? I wasn't quite clear on the difference. But that was soon to change.)

We had a great time in Lecce - not only with Antonio, Elena and her mother Ada, but also with a number of their friends and extended family, including the affable Luca, 17, and Luca's father Sergio, who made a fuss over us, taking us out for jaunts in his big Mercedes, and buying us ice cream. Sergio owned a shoe business in town, and we visited his office - where Zack and I were a little discomfited to see a portrait of Il Duce on the wall, and also a bronze bust displayed on a shelf. When I remarked on this later to Antonio, he said only that Sergio was "di destra" ("on the right"). He also mentioned that Sergio was having some trouble with Luca, who apparently was a bit of a firebug, and "un po' ritardato". But he was also "un

bravo ragazzo" ("a good boy"), and his family were very protective of him.

Right after we got back to the States, I posted a message to Larry on my Wall, telling him how great the trip had been, and listing the colorful cast of characters we'd met in Lecce. I described Sergio as a really nice guy - albeit a "Fascist", with Mussolini memorabilia in his office -- and also mentioned Luca, his "slightly retarded and pyromaniac son". All of this rattled off breezily on my Wall, in the untroubled style of the waggish raconteur, adept at drawing thumbnail sketches for his audience's amusement - but not quite so skilled at knowing how to configure his Facebook privacy settings, or even understanding the difference between the Wall and Messenger.

The next day I got a call from Ada, telling me to remove my posting about Luca and Sergio immediately. They had seen and understood everything I'd written to Larry (while I, of course, had assumed that only Larry could see it). Sergio was furious, and Luca was in tears. After I'd deleted the posting I messaged Luca repeatedly, but he didn't reply; when I called Ada back, she told me Luca's parents had cancelled his Facebook account. Frantically, I asked for Luca's home address so I could write him a

letter; but then Antonio got on the phone and said it was best to wait until things cooled down a bit. It took me a while to realize that no amount of "mi spiace!"s and "non sapevo!"s and "non volevo mai far mal a nessuno!"s ("I'm sorry! I didn't know! I never wanted to hurt anybody!"), and various other lame and totally inadequate apologies, repeated ad nauseam, although (and also because) they couldn't come close to expressing the true horror of what I felt - no words of mine, in any language, were going to change the reality of what my words had created in the first place. The memory of our trip to Italy, which only the day before had seemed a triumph of reunion and celebration, was now in ruins. ("Tutto rovinato!") Yesterday I was the steadfast American friend; today I was a back-stabbing villain.

The next few days were probably the worst of my life - worse, I think, than the days following the deaths of my mother, my father, or even my wife. Because in those deaths I was blameless - desolate, but blameless. But not so in the case of Sergio and Luca. To them - and to myself - I was a perpetrator. It wasn't quite as bad in the case of Sergio; after all, he was a fan of Il Duce, and so calling him a "Fascist", though needlessly provocative, was basically true. But Luca was just a boy - a relatively

innocent boy (except maybe for the pyromania), and a vulnerable one at that. "Slightly retarded." (He'd had no trouble figuring that one out.) A boy who Mr. American College Professor had used - publicly - for his sport. It really didn't matter, in the end, that I hadn't intended for him - or anybody but Larry - to see what I'd written. I'd written it, and Luca and his family had seen it. For days the words - so thoughtless, so glib, so hurtful, so irrevocable -- played over and over again in my head. A goat's worth of wit - not even that - and a lifetime of repentance. Whoever he was sure got that one right.

### III

#### "Comedy Is Not Pretty"

The weeks passed. After a series of abashed hand-written letters addressed to Luca via Antonio, in an Italian hardly up to the task (even in English these letters would have been hard to write; in my hobbled Italian I could hardly express the depth of my remorse) - after those letters, and the passage of time, the burden of my villainy began to lift a little. But Luca never answered my letters. (I wonder now if Antonio even showed them to him; perhaps not,

wishing to spare him any further pain - and avoid re-awakening the meridional wrath of Sergio.)

The next summer Zack, who'd now decided to major in Italian, was studying in Turin. I came over to see him, and took the opportunity to fly to Bari and visit Antonio again in Lecce. I wanted to make amends, and Antonio arranged for Luca to come by the house. We shook hands, and chatted briefly. (In my effusive gratitude for his visit, I would have liked to embrace him; but even I could see that that would have been awkward for him.) Sergio was never mentioned; I'm pretty sure Antonio never even told him I was there. (Though Luca probably did; at least I can't see how he wouldn't have.) More time passed, and Luca got back on Facebook; now we are Facebook friends again. Whatever that means. I guess it means he holds no grudges - which says a lot about him.

And what does it say about me? What do these two sad imbroglios say about me? That I am an idiot when it comes to Facebook? (At the very least.) That I can also be - Facebook aside -- clueless, tactless, thoughtless, smartass, glib, impulsive, ignorant (and not only about Facebook)? All of that is true. Sure, I know that what happened to me could have happened to anyone, and that much worse has happened to many, both on Facebook and off. But

that doesn't make what I did any less awful, or do anything to erase the shame of the memory.

It's not really the shame that interests me here, though. It's rather my clear ineptitude, as a writer, with the medium of Facebook. I like to think of myself as a pretty good writer; but on Facebook, it seems, I am hopeless. I just don't get it; I don't get the medium. I keep finding ways to put my foot in my mouth. I keep being "that guy". Maybe it's because Facebook, and social media in general, are what Marshall McLuhan would call a "cool" media. They're not good at nuances of thought or feeling. (Not that either of my postings contained any nuances of thought or feeling; they were quite oafish and coarse.) They magnify and caricature impressions, blow them up and expose them to potential ridicule. To the critical eye of Facebook (if that is not an oxymoron, since it's not a medium - like print, say - known for its capacity for finer discernment), a single, brief impression goes a long way. What might seem a small tactlessness or infraction in person, or even in print, gets magnified by the audience, the viewership, a hundred or a thousand or a million times, like a zit on a colossal screen. In that sense the internet, as a medium, is utterly unforgiving - hence its particular propensity for shaming (as Jon Ronson has

pointed out in his timely book, So You've Been Publicly Shamed).

But I don't really think the problem is the medium, or even me and the medium. It's not really a Facebook problem at all. I think the problem is more just me. Me and talking. Me and writing. Me and words. I know that's a huge and damning statement for a writer to make. I mean, for a writer to have a problem with words - what does that mean? Does that mean he's an incompetent (or just not very good) writer? I read somewhere that Einstein once got a letter from a kid who was having trouble with math, and wanted some advice. Einstein wrote back, "I sympathize with you, and I assure you that my troubles with mathematics are even greater than yours." This is hardly to imply that I am the Einstein of the written word, or bear any comparison whatsoever to him. It's just to suggest that any competent practitioner of an art or science needs to keep in mind, as a basic part of their competence, an honest sense of their own limitations, and even sometimes ignorance, in their own field.

I guess what I'm saying here is that my sense of being "that guy" extends farther even than I thought it did - farther than just Facebook. It extends to my use of words in relation to an audience - any audience. To the audience



(and to myself, but it's the audience I'm focusing on now) I am "that guy" - and that's not necessarily a bad thing. At least for the audience it's not. Because it is the listeners', the audience's recognition, when hearing these stories, that I am "that guy", and they aren't, that supplements the squirm-inducing humor, and feeds their laughter. I am "that guy", who perpetrated these hapless tactlessnesses, and the listeners aren't - they aren't "that guy". They might have been, but they aren't. And the relief in this recognition is part of their laughter. It is the laughter of relief as much as of schadenfreude. (And the two are no doubt connected.)

Furthermore, as "that guy" in both episodes, I find I am experiencing the strong desire, as Zack's high-school classmate would say, to Never Talk Again. After such experiences - after myself creating such experiences, bringing them totally and gratuitously on myself - and in the case of Luca, upon others as well, primarily upon others (that was why the Luca Debacle was so much worse than the Semipalatinsk Episode) - my desire to Never Talk Again (not only on Facebook, but anywhere, actually), to hang my head in shame and Never Talk Again, is very strong.

Because, you see, at times like this I do not really trust myself to talk again. I believe that whatever jokes

I may want to make will better be kept to myself. And even - and more extremely - that whatever humorous thoughts or perceptions I might have and want to share with others, should not be shared at all. We may call this the Pariah Syndrome. It is extreme, it is excessively reactive and punitive, the Pariah Syndrome; but it is a true feeling, and I register it. I register it very strongly. Never Talk Again, Never Write Again, Never Share Again. Because writing can be painful, and people can get hurt - both the author of the words, and the people he writes about. As Steve Martin used to archly say - or said once, anyway, that I heard, in his stand-up routine: "Comedy is not pretty". Indeed, Steve. So clever -- and so true. Even in the hands of a master like Martin, so true; how much truer in the hands of an amateur or would-be internet comedian like myself?

#### IV

##### The Alternative Self

But let us not be too self-punitive here. It is a tendency I have, and I know it is unseemly. ("That guy" is also a whipping boy.) I know that Never Talk Again is not an option, as tempting as it may sometimes be. I must talk again; as a writer (especially one dealing with issues of

shame, guilt, failure, whatever), it's what I do. I must talk, and see what comes out. Sometimes what comes out is not pretty - is that guy - but that's OK. When my listeners recognize that I'm that guy, and they aren't, they laugh. And isn't that my intention too - to make them laugh?

But it goes farther than that, I think - farther than the laughter, or the relief. The laughter and relief point to something else: an alternative self. Their alternative self. They're not that guy, but they know they could have been. That guy lurks there, just over the horizon. Heaven forbid that he come any closer; but he could. And the relief and the laughter recognize this.

And the thing is, that guy is my alternative self, too. Except that I was him. Am him. Unlike my listeners, I am him. (Ce mec, c'est moi!) I am my alternative self - at least at the time, and after, I commit my tactless infraction. I recognize the me of the Semipalatinsk Episode, and the Luca Debacle, as alternative selves that just happened to have the misfortune to share, for a few unhappy moments, the same dimension as me - the actual me. It's like that scene at the end of the movie *Midnight Special*, when the two universes intersect, and the awesome (in the original sense) structure of the kid's home

universe is sticking up out of the field. The alternative self is that alien structure, and it's here. It's happening now. And it's me. Oh shit!

But let us not get too metaphysical here, either. I know that's an occupational hazard of mine, too. It is tempting for one of my mystico-philosophical turn of mind to wax metaphysical. Nor do I want to be too universalizing when I generalize about my listeners, my audience, and their alternative selves. Because how do I know, really, what they are thinking? I know only that they are laughing, and shaking their heads, in disbelief, and relief. Let that be enough for me. Dayenu. I suspect - no, I know - we all have alternative selves. I was playing with one of them when I posted my stupid Semipalatinsk joke. Did my Facebook friends experience laughter and relief when they read what I wrote? No, I don't think so; though maybe they experienced embarrassment for me. I know I would have; indeed, I did. The blush of shame was hot on my cheek for a while. It eventually passed, as the much greater horror of the Luca Debacle also eventually passed. That's the thing about feelings: they pass. But the written word remains. Even on the internet - that most ephemeral of all media (except maybe the radio) - the written word remains (pace the "Right to Be

Forgotten" movement). The mark of our alternative selves is not so easily expunged. A little bit of that alien structure, that alternative universe, remains in the field of our usual selves. And that, I suppose, is only as it should be. For if a writer lives by and in his words, and our words, unlike ourselves, never die, then he has no right to complain about the form his immortality may happen to take. It is the only form of eternal life we can rightly lay claim to. In this universe, anyway.