

Frank Mazer

Amarillo walking

She is looking at me as if I had asked her to remove her dress. The doe-eyed young woman behind the hotel front desk seems befuddled as she looks blankly in my direction. Words stutter from her lips. Bookstore. I have asked how to cross the street to the bookstore. I'm in Amarillo, Texas. My mind harkens back to my first attempt to visit the books. It seemed a simple task. It became akin to safely landing a man on Mars.

I recall the first moment of trouble when I saw the bookstore located on the corner across the street from the hotel. A 4 lane road with several additional lanes for turning and for entrances to Interstate Highway 40 which looms above, stands between the nice hotel on the corner lot and the bookstore. I recall being full of false confidence as I stepped out of the hotel doors with only the parking lot between myself and some book browsing for the morning. My confidence was shaken as I was hit by a powerful, musty smell. It was the smell of cow dung. Hanging in the air like a visible cloud. Seeming to take a seat on my clothes even as I stood on the steps outside the door. Dung and dust mixed together in a recipe which caused me to gasp for a moment. It

was a reminder that large cattle facilities lurk near-by as a part of this fair city. I was not deterred by mere air. I step to the side of the road. I search for a place to cross at the light on the corner. There is no cross-walk.

A 16 wheel truck thunders and thumps past me feeling closer than a safe comfort margin would suggest. I step back. The game is afoot. To cross on foot.

It quickly became clear that should I dare to defy the nature of the landscape I will soon be standing stranded in the middle of the road with no concrete island for refuge and very thick angry fast moving traffic thundering all around me not wishing me good tidings. For one thing, seldom is seen in this state a pedestrian attempting a journey and, thus, this footward behavior of mine may be seen as a hostile act. There must be a provision for walkers my silly, idealistic Euro –mind whispered in my ear. You’re simply missing something silly fellow. I size up the scene of rushing metallic creatures and the bookstore beyond and I determine to ask an expert frontier guide who could be familiar with this wilderness. Thus, I trotted into the hotel lobby to speak with the receptionist.

“Saved! I’m Saved” As I trot across the hotel parking lot I pass my car and my mind takes me back to my drive along

Interstate Highway 40 into Amarillo. My radio was tuned to FM. I flick the search button and a smooth, powerful, male, emotional voice calls out to me, “You shall be saved”! “Hallelujah!” I decide perhaps they have the wrong person as I have not yet met them. I hit the search button again, the radio stops at another station, I’m saved again! Wow, there is an amazingly eclectic selection on the radio dial here, my mind bellows as I hit the search button again. “Saved!” “You are saved” I am reminded once more. I begin to feel extremely well liked here in Amarillo before I have even set foot in town! How did they know I was coming? And they all have saved me already! What an amazing array of intellect! They must have spotted my tiny blue car and known I would need to be saved. Another station soon bellows to me that being saved is mine, and I can also send contributions and things by credit card. I spin the on dial to off.

My cow manure drenched brain spins back into the present moment as the hotel electric doors purr open and the shiny modern lobby seems to beckon me forward to where I am sure I will find my guide to the frontier. She is brilliant and pleasant with her practiced smile of glee. She is brimming with confidence. She is overflowing with pride in her city. She is seemingly afloat in shiny tourist brochures. She can

tell me where any of five gun-shooting ranges are or direct me to the motor-speedway. She is an amazing fountain of public relations information. She is useless to me.

I ask her if she can tell me how I can walk across the street to the bookstore. The blank look on her face turns to one of seeming pity and dismay. Confused thoughts go through my head. Perhaps I have spoken some kind of Texan code for “George W. Bush was not a better President than Abraham Lincoln”? There is a long pause. She breaks it with a stutter and a “don’t y’all have a car?”. She follows-up with, it’s a long way to be walking. To make her point she adds, “I don’t think I’ve ever walked that far.” She wants to help. She is not sure how she can do so. I may as well have asked her to solve Fermi’s theorem or explain why the Chicago Cubs baseball team has not won a world series in many decades? She gathers her senses, determined to be of help. I am grateful.

In order to find a place to cross I’ll need to walk up the sidewalk a half-mile or so, to where I’ll see the Walmart to my right. I need to keep going beyond until the sidewalk runs out for a while and becomes a vacant lot for about 400 meters. After this I must proceed to the “Church of Christ” and then proceed another 400 meters to the stop-light. There I will see the “all you can eat buffet” sign which means I am at

the correct place to cross the street. Obviously, after crossing I will then need to proceed back along the other side of the street, where there are few sidewalks for walking but there are several parking lots. Eventually I will reach the bookstore. I thank her. I can see that, as with so many folks here, she is so eager to help she would probably dare to walk part of the way to be sure I am not lost.

I step out into the outdoors. I find myself thinking, this cannot be how my beautiful, wonderful, great country envisions providing for walkers. I recognize this is not New York City. This is different, it is a part of heartland America. I stride across the hotel parking again. I turn right and head toward the side walk. My goal is to follow the recommended course. I wait at the corner of the 2 lane cross street. I push the button to cross the small street. A shadow is suddenly cast across me by a vehicle blocking the sun. It is a high - standing SUV (sport utility vehicle) driven by an angry looking mom shouting at one of several children in the seats. She looks at me suspiciously. The car rumbles. Her cell phone is next to her ear. Perhaps she doesn't see me after all? That may not be a good thing. I wait. I think. I walk back to my little blue car and I decide to drive to the bookstore. It's easy. And I am "saved" on the way.