

Frank Mazer

Texas welcome

The look in their eyes tells me I am a stranger. I pull the door of the little restaurant shut behind me. The memory of the sign proclaiming “Texas Welcome Center Two miles ahead” flashes into my mind. The look on the faces strikes with a physical force which makes me feel as if I am being pushed back against the door. I take a small step and slip on the hundreds of peanut shells on the floor. At two tables there are two couples seated with their eyes and vibrations fixed on me. At one of the three other tables a grizzled looking older man stares. I believe I can hear the sound of the theme from “The good, the bad and the ugly”. I tell myself I must find the Eastwood role. Do I have what it takes? Time stands still as I stare inside myself and wonder if I have stepped back into a crack in time or space. A journey to a separate dimension. Another small step forward and it leaps out at me and bumps me, this small rack with postcards and small souvenirs.

I am startled but try not to show it. I should focus on where I am going but I am still figuring out what is this place and how did I get here? I tell myself to act unperturbed. Calm. Clint-like. I pretend I wanted this meeting with the rack and I

begin to scan it while I determine whether a quiet retreat out the door is in order without turning my back. I imagine the feel of the proper steps back with hands by sides as if the holster was at the ready. A hand touches my arm. What! I spin, but under control. Or so I tell myself. Like every man wants to believe. When confronted by “a” woman.

She asks if she could help me. Being of confused mind and much tension at that moment I have no wise words to share with the elderly woman who had seemingly appeared from out of the sawdust. Being not Clint my words come awkwardly and not biting. I ask if I may be seated. Did I hear her say “you can check in but you cannot check out”? She tells me “of course, right over here” she points and then she disappears out the door into the light. The other eyes watch as I take a seat at the little booth near the window. The blinds are drawn shut to keep the sun from burning into the room. I remind myself this is Texas after all and I peer down pretending to read my book while I note the other eyes look to each other for the moment in conversation. I see there is motion and it is coming my direction. I look down and consider the thick collection of sawdust on the floor and the fact there was a wooden hitching post and wood planks and stairs as I entered. I notice my adidas shoes seem out of place in this zone. I recall the others seated and shuffling their

cowboy boots as they turned to note my entrance. And now, I see on the floor next to my table another pair of – Adidas?!

I look up. Her slim figure with curves and apron I note she may be 25, 30, 35 looking like a co-ed. It's the eyes. She hands me a menu and smiles. I hear nothing. I am pulled into the eyes. Yet another dimension. Big, almond doe eyes. The dark eye make-up around them, done nicely dark and tastefully and correctly strong enough that I am pulled into the eyes which are surrounded by this dark. Could this dimension have known I have a soft spot for this kind of darkclad eyes? Am I in a dimension which knew me before I knew it? Am I just a lonely, lost figure of a fellow happy to meet such eyes? She speaks more loudly asking for my order, "What would I like"? She says.

The arrival here had not been by choice. Nor by chance, as it seems. I sense being thrown here. My car decided this was as far as the transmission was to go. So there came a glide to the right shoulder of Interstate Highway 35. There began a step along the slice of life known as North Texas. So at high noon, without Gregory Peck in sight, there came my handy phone into my hand. There were no buildings in sight. It's just after Christmas. There are some leafless trees in the woods to the side of the autobahn. I see brown fields scattered in the distance. The highway reaches uphill ahead for a kilometer.

To the side of my car there is a drop –off of 10 meters down to a small road. These roads are known in southern USA as “frontage” roads. They often parallel larger highways. I tell myself, as the car shakes when large trucks roar past, that I should not panic. Being trusting and supremely naïve as I am about an insurance company, I know it will only take a telephone call to them. Quickly, there will soon be a truck to tow me to a garage and a padded chair while they correct what is some simple misunderstanding on the part of my auto. I know they may simply tow me the 80 kilometers back to my daughter’s house whence I have come after a Christmas visit to her and the young grandsons.

Soon my voyage across the south of Oklahoma and the North Texas became a journey into the nothingness of the telephone system of the insurance company. Thirty minutes turned into an hour. My hope turned into a thankfulness, seated in the auto, that it was a pleasant autumn like day instead of a hot Texas day. My phone path took me places I need not go , and finally , a human voice from the ether listened to me and my high seas plains plight and advised me theirs was no help to be had and I must try another phone number. My phone now begged to differ. It’s smiley face looked at me, as handy phones do, and it told me the battery was near its death. Knowing CPR I was tempted to throw myself into a desperate attempt at electronic resuscitation. I looked

askance at the barren trees and dried green grass meadows and wondered “where am and where to”? The merciful phone god allowed me a brief minute to inform the daughter back in Oklahoma that I was adrift about a mile into Texas. Being the sharp frontiersman I knew this because I had taken note of the giant billboard sign by the side of the highway ahead of me which proclaimed “Texas Welcome Area 2 Miles”.

I told myself to recognize the moment as a chance for a walk on Texas soil on a pleasant day. I set out to find a pay phone or a place to recharge my handy so as to then seek ultimate rescue. But this walk would be only after pushing all things into the trunk of the car and shouldering a small brown ‘timberland’ carry bag wherein would be my “person” in the form of credit cards and other modern definings of modern humanness, Across the recently injured neck the strap went. Onwards the feet moved. Being fit, I looked to this opportunity for a small physical workout instead of a ten hour day of pushing a car pedal and maneuvering my rear quarters along a car seat. Down to the frontage road the feet moved. Back along the frontage road carried the feet toward the large building I had seen in the direction whence I had come. Past woods, and field and cow and up a small hill to find within sight after 15 minutes walking the round hut standing alone with sign saying “Adult Video”. Two vehicles parked in front of it. A sign across the highway shouts “Welcome to Texas”.

I enter the building. Finding suspicious gentlemen willing to speak to me long enough to sternly say they can be of no help but I should proceed south afoot toward the city of Gainseville. So it is that I find myself retracing my steps along a frontage road and past cow and up hill with the sun in a forward position on my Texas tour. To my side there came a purple car throbbing slowly to keep pace with me. The two fellows inside leaning over to inquire where I am headed. I tell them for a walk to town. I am offered a grin including several missing teeth and a ride if I like. I tell them I like walking for the fitness. With a nod, they rumble off in the direction of the adult video store. I stumble forward up and over hill and in 20 minutes into sight of Texas Welcome center a mile or more ahead. Wide plains lying in all directions and Gainesville city situated in a valley five miles ahead. There is a rumbling sound. The car and four eyes very slowly pass me by headed in direction of Gaineville. I hear dueling banjos echoing in the distance of deliverance.

I am soon seated on the floor of the modern welcome center. My handy phone plugged into the only electrical outlet which was not in a private office. Large people come happily striding through the building as they seek Texas information or use of restrooms.

The curious look on some of the faces as they see this slim fellow seated on the floor speaking into, or worshipping with his hand to his mouth. Soon I have arranged through my daughter for a friend with a tow truck to come meet me at the mile marker “sign-post up ahead” where my car is seated on the shoulder of the highway. However, he cannot be there until darkness six hours away.

The body now calls for more recharging than the handy. I step outside to the road. With unkeen eyes of age still able to see the billboard distant proclaiming “Food Exit 501” Next my feet take me in that direction. Perhaps following the footsteps of Davy Crockett.

Or the tires of the purple car. And so thirty minutes along the road and over the hill, walking in the sun brings me to the choices. Next to this little road untraveled by cars there is a seemingly deserted Conoco Gas (benzene) station which calls out that it has sandwiches as ghosts seem to flap the signs and darkened broken windows proclaim times gone by. Next to it there is an apparently empty, shaky, old-west ,wooden structure which has a sign on its roof proclaiming “Bar – B – Q Burgers”. If I had my horse I would dismount and tie it to the hitching post outside and I would step into my John Ford role in the film. My hunger gained the better of my struggle with courage and I stepped forward up the wooden steps

wondering if this was an entry into a ghost town or my own mind.

So it is that I have pushed the door open and discovered the peanut shells and sawdust. And the eyes. Soon come my eggs and conversation. In these dry plains it is met with surprising pleasure like a drink of the fresh lemonade she pours for me over and over while I let some hours go by in this dimension rather than wait in the buffeted car amidst the highway noise pollutions. She has a seat for a while. Her name is Anna , and for a couple of hours she shares with me as she waits upon my table , my presence now being the only patron for the entire length of our visit together. Two worlds. It becomes an eye-opening educational experience to quickly have her trust enough to take me to the fact her father had passed away and she had left Gainesville and his presence as a large community figure. There came a life in Houston and home built and then work in Mexico selling fixed up cars from the states. In the midst of it all her brown pony-tail swayed and the lemonade made for visits to the toilet as I wondered at her sharings as this ambitious woman hard - working. Soon came the sharing about her five children. All of them girls. The oldest two, near 13 years old, living with their dad. Her using some French phrases as she describes her children and then her enjoyment of learning French in school but never having the use for it here amid the peanut shells. There comes a

sense again of whether the sun has played upon my head too long in my Texas walk and this is all far into my own zone of twilight. For a brief moment she listens with fascination to the lost wanderer in the blue stopped car as he shares of life in London, Paris, and mountains called Alps. The blue car man, thankful to whatever dimensions there are for this momentary taste of freshness in the day of broken cars and long roads and handy rescues, needs to leave now, perhaps before this portal elsewhere closes.

So it is the sound of gravel underfoot which comes to be oh so sweet. I step from the bottom step of the wooden porch. The door closed behind me. The real gravel underneath. I wonder, as my steps take me forward toward the road back to the car, if the little café' will disappear in a mist. I do not dare look back as I stride faster seeing the Interstate 35 in the distance with its cacophony of life run amok. Fast giant trailer trucks thunder along into the world. And the two lane road running parallel stands next to what may have been the long rectangular sign filled with dark red and interrupted by large white letters which read "Bar-B-Q Hamburgers" whilst sitting atop a corrugated iron roof. I find myself thankful for whatever the Texas oasis is. As I step in the dusk back to the broken blue car I wonder if I ever dare to return to see if this sign is indeed? So I pass the "welcome to Texas" sign while

the tow truck carries me away. A taste of America placed on the mind.